



THAT  
CALI KIND  
*Of Love*  
2

LA DONNA ROBINSON



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**THAT CALI KIND OF LOVE**  
**PART 2:**

*Hitta and LaLa*

**A novel by**  
***La Donna Robinson***



## CHAPTER ONE

Hitta and Catrell hadn't been gone a whole hour before a hard purposeful knock was at my door. "Who is it?" I asked. Coming to my spot unannounced was a definite no-no, first of all. Furthermore, only very few people knew where my residence was located.

"Police, Ma'am! We just want to ask you some questions," came the voice from the other side.

"Some questions, huh?" I asked as I opened the door. "About what? I don't know anything about anything so you're kind of wasting your time. But since you're here, let's go through the protocol of me telling you *on record* that you're wasting your time."

"Ma'am, we have a warrant for your arrest in the murder of Zephaniah-"

"Okay," I interrupted, "if you have a warrant for my arrest you should have said that shit from the beginning. You misrepresented yourself and I will be making a formal complaint. A warrant for arrest is much different from asking a couple of questions," I informed him angrily.

Angry at the intrusion of an unfamiliar voice, Beyonce' came running out of nowhere barking and growling. Her man, Jay-Z had her back to the fullest and began hissing at the officer.

As he led me out in cuffs, there were four police cars parked in front of my house and the driveway, blocking my Charger. I almost laughed out loud but there wasn't shit funny about having guns pointing at you, no matter the situation.

"You have the right to remain silent," he began.

"Boy, bye!" I snapped. "Don't do that First 48 shit on me. Just get me to where I'm going so I can make my phone call." He continued with his Mirandas, as if I hadn't spoken. I was livid! Not at the fact that I had been caught. Every choice has its consequences. Mali had taught me long ago that you don't do dirt then cry about it when you get caught. If you got enough heart to do it, then have enough heart to suffer the consequences. So be it. But regardless, I was still pissed. Somebody had placed me at the scene of the crime. I knew without a doubt that it wasn't Simba or her fam. A neighbor maybe? Or...I quickly shook the thought from my mind. Even Jayshon wouldn't stoop this low...or would he? I underestimated no one and was skeptical of those I half-way trusted. He was a definite suspect.

"Excuse me," I said to the officer, "but I have a three-year-old nephew that I'm taking care of. What's going to happen to him?" I asked.

"Child Services," he said quietly and had the nerve to look sympathetic. "Look, if it were up to me, you'd still be in your house doing what you were doing. I couldn't stand the so-called *victim* and if you did do it, you should be getting an award. But the law is the law and it's not my call."

"I understand," I said. "But my nephew is with my fiancé right now. Can he keep him until his mom comes home?" I didn't mention that his mom wouldn't be home for six months. That info was on a need-to-know basis.

"Shouldn't be a problem. We'll notify your fiancé and make sure the child will be okay with him for a couple of hours until his mom gets home," he said.

"Thanks," I said simply. I then turned to the officer on my other side. He looked at me then quickly turned his head. He looked familiar but I couldn't figure out where I had seen him before. He was tall, brown skinned, and bald headed.

Probably in his late twenties or early thirties. I could tell from his build that he worked out religiously.

One of the cop cars pulled out ahead of us, then we went, then the other two brought up the rear. I sat silently in the back seat, wondering what would become of me. I wasn't built for no jail shit. I would kill a bitch trying to pull that dyke-shit on me. I then thought of Catrell. What would my baby do without me? His mom was gone, his great-granny was gone, his favorite uncle, and now his aunt was gone. Then I thought of Hitta. We were over before we really began. Surely, whatever sentence was dropped on me, he would not be waiting when I returned. Mali would be so mad at me. Surely, he was looking down and shaking his head at me. Zeph was probably looking up from hell and laughing out loud at me. That's cool my'nig...but I still got the last laugh...



## CHAPTER TWO

With shaking hands and my heart racing one hundred miles per hour, I dialed Hitta's number.

"Hello?" he answered. I briefly closed my eyes and blinked back the tears. *I just got him Lord, please don't let me lose him*, I silently prayed.

"It's me," I said, trying to sound normal.

"You okay, Baby? The police called and asked me if they needed to send Child Services for Catrell. LaLa, listen to me, Babe," he said.

"I'm listening," I replied, wiping tears from my eyes.

"I'm not going anywhere. You got my word. I'll be here waiting however long it takes," he promised.

"Unfortunately Hitta, I don't know how long however will be," I said.

"It doesn't matter. I got'chu. Do you believe me?" he asked.

"I want to," I answered. "But this shit is about to get real. I get arraigned tomorrow and I'm looking at some years, Hitta."

"No, you're not, Babe. Those people don't give a fuck about Zeph. Look, Babe. We can't discuss this over the phone. I'll be to see you as soon as I can okay?" he said.

"Okay," I agreed. "Where is Catrell?"

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"He's fine, LaLa. He's eating right now. He can stay with me until this shit gets straightened out," he offered.

"What if it doesn't get straightened out?" I asked. "Don't give him to Tina until she gets her shit together, Hitta. Promise."

"I promise, Babe," he said. "LaLa, this shit ain't about to happen the way you think it is. I just need you to hold on for a minute okay?"

"Okay," I said.

"Call me every day?" he asked.

"I will, Babe," I promised.

"Okay. I love you," he said.

"I love you too," I responded.

"Don't be crying and shit. I got'chu."

"I know you do," I said, trying to smile. I said goodbye and hung up the phone. Approximately one hour later, a lawyer showed up to talk to me.

"I don't want to be rude," I said, "But I will hire a real lawyer. I don't want a public defender," I informed him as politely as possible.

"I don't want to be rude either," he said, "but if I were you I'd sit my ass down and listen if someone had hired me a lawyer for two hundred dollars per hour."

"What?" I asked, unsure that I had heard correctly.

"I was hired by your fiancé," he said simply. Damn, I loved that man more than the air I breathed.

"Well, get to earning," I said, causing him to laugh.

"That's what I'm talking about," he said. "Let's find a way to get you out of here," he smiled.

"I appreciate that," I informed him.

We talked for hours, with him asking and me answering. He informed me that the police claimed that they had an eyewitness. Apparently someone had *heard* me at Zeph's house. And so what. He was my brother. I visited him all the time.

"LaDonna, you were affected by three consecutive deaths in less than a month's time. That would cause anyone to go insane," he said.

"I'm not pleading insanity for something I didn't do," I informed him. He sat back, looked at me, and then smiled.

"I like that," he said conspiratorially. "We gon' win this shit if it's the last thing we do."

"Indeed," I said, "To trial we go." He smiled widely.

"You really are Mali's sister aren't you?" he asked, shaking his head.

"You knew my brother?" I asked emotionally.

"Of course. He was a good friend. Who do you think did the appeal that got him out? Hired by no other...than your fiancé." Hitta was unbelievable. I would die if I lost my baby.

At my arraignment, my lawyer stood and clearly announced my plea, "Not guilty," he said with assurance and confidence. He argued that I should not have to sit in jail while awaiting trial because I would definitely not be accepting any pleas. It was denied. I turned around to face the people in the courtroom, and there in the front row was my Hitta. Catrell sat next to him.

"Auntie LaLa! Are you coming home?" Catrell asked loudly.

"Not yet, Baby. But I'll be there soon," I promised, with tears burning my eyes.

"When is soon, Auntie LaLa?" he asked, then burst out crying. "Hitta can't cook!" my baby cried inconsolably. Hitta looked as if he couldn't believe what Catrell just said, but stayed quiet. "What about Beyonce' and Jay-Z?" he continued to cry.

"I'll go get them," Hitta said.

"They prolly died!" Catrell screamed.

"Catrell, calm down. They're fine. Hitta will make sure all of you are okay," I promised.

"I want *you* though!" he screamed. Tears were running down my face as my nephew wiggled away from Hitta and tried to run toward me. Hitta grabbed him up and held him in his arms.

"Catrell, listen to me!" I ordered. He looked at me, still crying.

“Hitta is your best friend, remember?” he nodded. “Just like Uncle Mali. He’s not going to let anything happen to you, okay?”

“Okay, Auntie LaLa,” he relented.

“Okay, Baby. Hitta will bring you to see me, okay?” I said. He simply nodded. “Please take him out of here,” I pleaded with Hitta. He nodded in understanding and walked out of the courtroom, with my nephew screaming in his arms and holding his hands out to me as he was carried out.

The lawyer looked at the judge and shook his head. The judge wiped her eyes, then got up and left the courtroom.

## CHAPTER THREE

“Well, well, well...what have we here?” asked some crazy looking bitch that was clearly battling an identity crisis. I looked up at her from my newly assigned bed, and ignored her ass. “Oh you can’t speak?” she asked. I acted like she wasn’t even there. I couldn’t stand no basic-ass, simple-minded, kindergarten-going-ass bitch. “You got some pretty-ass hair,” she said, and reached out to touch it.

“Bitch don’t touch me. Do *not ever* touch me,” I snapped, feeling like jumping up and kicking it in it’s face.

“Whoa, whoa,” she laughed. “Why you so turnt, Ma? I’m one of the cool ones,” she said. “What you in here for?” she asked.

“I just needed a little break from the free world,” I said sarcastically. “What are you looking at?” I asked, as she stared intently into my face.

“You look a little familiar, but I can’t place where I’ve seen you,” she explained.

“I have never laid eyes on you in my life,” I clarified. “You don’t know me. Take that tired-ass dyke pick-up line somewhere else.”

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Don’t trip,” I said simply.

“Nah, for real. I promise I know you from somewhere,” she repeated.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

“Look, if you’re one of those jailhouse snitches that pretends to be cool so you get on the stand against me to save your own ass, you’re barking up the wrong tree,” I informed her. She fell out laughing.

“I guarantee you, I ain’t no snitch,” she said, and continued to laugh. “Now can you tell me your name?”

“That’s not your business,” I snapped.

“You’re going to be sleeping above me. That makes it my business, don’t it?” she asked.

“Not in my book,” I stated. “If you need me just say, ‘Hey’, and I’ll answer,” I said.

“Why are you being so difficult?” she asked, clearly perplexed.

“I watched every season of Orange is the New Black,” I informed her. “Right now you just want to know my name. Tomorrow you’ll wake up and be like, ‘Baby, make me some coffee.’ Then you’ll be trying to hold a make-shift wedding on the yard and calling me ‘your honey.’ Like I said, you are barking up the wrong tree,” I said angrily. She was laughing so hard that she probably didn’t even hear all of what I said.

“Okay, Okay. I got you,” she said.

“LaLa! Girl, are you alright?” At the sound of my name, I jumped up and ran to the door.

“How did you know I was here?” I asked, with tears in my eyes.

“Girl, we know everything up in here!” laughed my home girl Bria. I was so glad to see a familiar face. “Well at least you’re in here with the homegirl,” she said.

“*Whose* home girl? I don’t know her!” I said defiantly.

“Quit playing, LaLa! That’s Simba’s little sister, Coby!” Bria clarified.

“What? Why didn’t you say that?” I turned and asked Coby. “And when did you grow up so much?” I laughed and hugged her. “You were like thirteen the last time I saw you.”

“Yeah, you know how a nigga do though. I went to YA when I was thirteen. I got out when I was seventeen, but caught that hot one a year later. I beat it, but they got me on some bullshit right now,” she explained.

"Some bullshit huh?" Bria asked sarcastically.

"Shut up, Bria! You know I didn't mean to hit that bitch with my car!" Coby said emphatically.

"Right. The bitch that you had just caught fucking somebody else. What were you trying to do, give her a ride on the hood?" Bria laughed, and I joined in.

"Oh that's funny, LaLa?" Coby asked.

"Hell yeah!" I said and continued to laugh.

"Anyway, I ain't trippin' off that bitch!" Coby clarified. "She ain't dead anyway so it's all good," she said simply and went to get on her bed.

"LaLa, how long are you looking at?" Bria asked.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"They're saying you killed your brother," she informed me.

"And..." I said, not confirming nor denying.

"Did you?" she asked. I just looked at her. Home girl or no home girl, I wasn't trusting this bitch either.

"Hell no!" I explained. "You know how I felt about my brothers! And if I ever find out who did it, it's over for them!"

"Right! That's what I said too! Ain't no way in hell LaLa did that!" Bria said excitedly as I looked at her like she was crazy. Bitch if you were saying that all along then why did you ask. *Man, I tell ya', a bitch ain't shit*, I thought to myself while keeping a smile on my face. "So do you need anything, LaLa? If so, I got you."

"I'm cool," I said. "Thanks though."

"Did you get married?" she asked. "I had heard you was with some dude."

"I'm still with *some dude*," I responded.

"Well LaLa, I know you probably don't want to hear this, but when people get time, they're partner is usually long gone by the time they get out," she said sympathetically.

"You're right," I agreed. "I don't want to hear it. It was good talking to you, Bria."

"Alright girl, I'll see you later," she said and walked away.

"Ole messy-ass bitch," Coby mumbled. "That ho always in somebody's business, just like she was on the streets." I laughed. "She's just a stray mutt looking for a home."

"Bria is alright, Coby. She's just had a rough life," I explained.

"Yeah, and its gon' get a lot rougher if she don't stay outta my damn business. And don't be telling her ass shit about your business. That bitch can't hold water. That's why my sister beat that ass a few months ago," she said.

"Simba?" I asked incredulously. "Why?"

"That mouth," she said simply. "She talks too damn much about shit she don't know nothing about."

"Oh," I said, not wanting to hear any more. She kept talking. "Ever since she been fucking with that nigga J-Bone she act like her shit don't stink! Stupid ass talking about me! She done took a case for this nigga and he ain't came to check on that ass not one time!" she laughed.

"She's with J-Bone?" I asked.

"She thinks she is! But truth be told, he don't want that bitch. He ain't gon' ever leave his baby's mom for these bitches!" I kept silent, urging her to keep talking. "Some chick named Kimmy that lives out in the OC," she said. "That baby got to be about a year old by now," she said. *Kimmy was a friend of Sin and mine. So while Sin was creeping with my man, Kimmy was creeping with him too and had gotten pregnant by him and had a baby. Sin and I had given the bitch a baby shower, bought hundreds of dollars' worth of baby stuff, and had even visited her in the hospital when she had the baby; and all along, I was visiting my man's other side bitch. Damn...cold ass world.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

I had been sitting in the county jail for six months, three weeks, two days, and fourteen hours, awaiting trial. The District Attorney had asked for two postponements already and the judge politely informed him that he wouldn't get another. I had been offered two deals so far and had turned them both down. I was taking the shit to trial if it was the last thing I ever did.

Come to find out, Tamiko, the chick that Zeph had brought over on that rainy day, had been in the house when I shot Zeph. However, she now said that she couldn't be sure if it was me because she was hiding behind the couch. She said she heard my voice, but didn't see my face.

My attorney informed the District Attorney, in a closed meeting, that I had only met the chick one time and there was no way she could be that familiar with my voice after hearing it one time. She refused to testify, saying that she wasn't about to let anyone make a fool out of her on the stand, and that she really wasn't sure if it was me at all. She had blown the prosecution's case, and they were not happy about it. My lawyer came with the news as soon as he had left the meeting.

"Things are looking really good for you LaLa," he smiled. He ran down the entire story, and then left as I sat there in tears. I replayed the conversation over and over in my mind until Coby came and shoved a bag of Doritos under my nose as I laid on my bed.

"Eat some," she said.

"No!" I said, moving her hand. "I gotta use the phone," I informed her.

"Here, use mine," she suggested and whipped out an illegal-ass cell phone.

"Girl, put that shit up! I am *not* using that thing!" I said.

"Why not? I'll have you know that this phone has great reception, takes the clearest pics ever, and I have unlimited talk and text!" she said haughtily.

"Your ass is gon' have unlimited jail time if you get caught with that damn phone! Stupid ass! Don't you want to get out of here?"

"Of course," she stated simply. I shook my head.

"Girl, Simba should have beat you up more when you were a kid," I said, causing her to laugh.

"Your dude coming today?" she asked.

"No, I asked him to take my nephew to see his mom today," I replied.

"She locked up?"

"No, she's in some kind of program. She was about to get out this month, but she gave a dirty test and got three more months," I said sadly, thinking about my poor nephew.

"He don't mind taking him?" she asked.

"He kind of does mind. They don't like missing visits, so they were both kind of tight about it," I admitted.

"You love that dude, huh, LaLa?" she observed.

"More than life," I confessed.

"You'll be home with him soon," she assured me with a smile.

"Thanks Coby. I'm going to miss you, Boo. No matter what kind of turn this shit takes, I'll be leaving you soon. You're definitely a real one," I said.

"Girl, go on with all that shit," she said with misty eyes. I laughed. "LaLa, can you redo my braids? They looking kind of shabby," she frowned.

"Yep. Come on, Boo. I got you," I smiled.

“LaLa, don’t be clownin’ and shit! Don’t be trying to give me no girly ass shit! You know what? Never mind! You play too much!”

“You’re not even giving me a chance!” I laughed.

“Cause you be on that bullshit! Don’t give me like no designs and shit, LaLa! I want the straight-backs. No cuts, no chaser!” she informed me. I was hollering. She cracked me up.

She removed her pillow from the pillowcase and threw the pillow on the floor, flopping down on top of it. “Ready?” I asked sarcastically.

“Yeah, I’m good, Cuzz. You?” she asked. I shook my head.

“Girl, come on!” I laughed, sitting behind her. If someone was just being introduced to Coby, they would think she was a dude. I couldn’t believe this was the same little girl that used to want to follow me and Simba everywhere we went.

“LaLa, your dude is real lucky,” she said suddenly. “You’re a cool-ass chick.”

“Okay, before this conversation goes any further, let me inform you that orange ain’t my new black. Don’t start that old *hold my belt loop* shit with me ‘cause I will fuck you up in here. I love Simba to death but don’t start none, and I guarantee you there won’t be none.”

“That shit just hurt me to my core, LaLa,” she said dramatically. “How you gon’ get at me like that?” I fell out laughing.

“Shut the fuck up!” I continued to laugh. “That’s that shit you use on these bitches to manipulate them into what you want them to do! Ain’t gon’ work on me, Boo!” She gave me dap and we laughed together.

“I wouldn’t use my game on you, LaLa. You’re the big homegirlhomegirl. I got a lot of love for you,” she said shyly.

“Okay, Coby. I’m sorry,” I apologized.

“It’s cool,” she said. “I know you don’t rock that way. I ain’t trippin’. But if you ever change your mind...” I popped her hard on top of her head with the comb. “Ow, LaLa! Why you do that?”

That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"You better shut the fuck up before I have you walking around looking like Beyonce' in here!" I said.

"I was just playin', LaLa, damn!"

"Well don't even play," I said and was dead-ass serious. I had a full menu of what I was dying to eat and pussy was not on the list.

"Okay! I'll stop," she relented, as I pulled her hair so tightly into a braid that she cringed. "LaLa, stop! I need my edges!"

"Act like it then!"

"Your little ass is mean is hell!" she said.

"And your little ass is gay as hell!" I snapped. She fell out laughing.

"Where the hell did that come from? Old random-ass thought!"

"Heyyy y'all...it sure sounds like a party up in here," Bria said, standing there staring at us accusingly.

"Bitch, are we supposed to be up in here weeping or some shit?" Coby asked. "I forgot your wicked ass is allergic to the sound of joy, I'm surprised you didn't melt or some shit."

"Very funny, Boo," Bria said.

"Girl, move your hatin' ass along. There's nothing to see here," Coby said.

"I didn't come to see you anyway," Bria snapped. "I came to see LaLa."

"For what?" I asked.

"I wanted to show you my pictures," she said with a smile. I walked over to her and she passed them through the bars. "Me and my baby." I genuinely thought the bitch was talking about her and her child. I looked at the first picture, and J-Bone's face looked back at me.

"Girl, bye," I said. "Take this bullshit and get the fuck on."

"LaLa, I just wanted you to see my pictures," she said innocently.

"Oh, okay," I relented. "I will look at them." She walked back up to the bars and I pretended to reach for the pics. Instead, I reached out and grabbed her collar, snatching her up

tight against the bars. "Bitch, I'm the last one you want to play these games with. Take these little Disney camera ass pics and get the fuck away from my cell. Don't fuck with me, Bria," I warned.

"Let me go, LaLa! What the hell is wrong with you?" she asked, trying to squirm free.

"Stay away from me, Bria. That little ass whoopin' you got from Simba ain't nothing compared to the way you gon' get served if you keep fuckin' with me. You got it?"

"But, I don't understand," she protested.

"Okay, let me help to make it clear!" I said, snatching her up to the bars so that her head clanged against the metal.

"Oww! LaLa, let me go! I didn't even do anything!" she cried.

"Do not fuck with me, Bria. Keep your messy ass away from me. Make this the last time you bring your hood-rat ass anywhere near me. Bye, bitch."

She scurried away from my cell like the rat she was. I turned around to find Coby laughing so hard that tears ran from her eyes.

"That bitch head against those bars sounded like somebody ringing a church bell!" she laughed. "That's what that ho gets!"



## CHAPTER FIVE

When I finally made it to sleep, I dreamt of Hitta. “LaLa, get up. LaLa!” “What the hell is wrong with you? Don’t be waking me up like that! It’s the middle of the damn night! What do you want?” I asked angrily.

“They’re calling you!” Coby said excitedly.

“What time is it?” I asked groggily.

“Nine o’clock,” she answered.

“Damn. I didn’t know it was that late.”

“I been to breakfast and everything already,” she informed me. “But get your lazy ass up. They’re calling you.”

I brushed my teeth and washed my face, then ran a brush over my hair and put it in a ponytail. I then waited for them to open my cell door. I stepped out and followed the officer.

“Hey, LaLa!” my attorney smiled excitedly. The officer frowned at the use of my nickname. I frowned back. *Bitch mind your own*, I thought to myself.

“Good morning,” I said hesitantly. “You’re here early.

“Indeed I am,” he smiled. “That way you can enjoy the whole day being free instead of just part of it.” It took me a moment to register his words.

“You’re kidding,” I said, with tears coming to my eyes.

“Now would I joke about something like that?” he laughed. “You are a free woman, LaLa.”

"Are you sure?" I asked, wiping at the tears running down my face.

"Well, according to this I am," he said, sliding some papers across the table. I scanned over it, and read the same heading three or four times to be sure I had read correctly: Release Order. I broke down crying like I had never cried before.

"Does Hitta know?" I asked.

"Nope. Wanted you to be the first to know. You can call him if you want to, or we can surprise him. It's up to you," he said. I smiled widely.

"Let's surprise him!" I laughed.

"I brought you some clothes. You'll have time to change and everything. You still need to be processed out."

"I can't thank you enough," I cried.

"The pleasure was all mine," he smiled.

I practically floated back to my cell. Coby was sitting on her bed grinning from ear to ear.

"Go do that free-world shit, LaLa," she smiled. We high-fived each other, then hugged tightly.

"I'll be in touch, Coby," I promised.

"You ain't gon' have time for all that. You got a boy to raise and a man to take care of. I ain't trippin'. I understand," she said somewhat sadly.

"Like I said, I'll be in touch, Coby."

"Yeah, okay. I believe you."

"I don't give a damn if you believe me or not. You'll see," I said simply. "All this shit is yours. The only thing I want are my letters and pictures."

"That's cool, LaLa. Thanks," she smiled.

"You're welcome," I said, smiling with her.

"Damn, I'ma have a big-ass spread tonight," she said, rubbing her hands together anxiously. I fell out laughing. "Take care of yourself, LaLa. And don't forget to send me some books so I can sell 'em. Sign 'em first though. I'm gon' make a killing!"

"You will NOT be up in here selling my shit on the black market! Are you crazy?"

"Okay," she laughed. "But damn, you act like you wasn't gon' get a cut or some shit." I could do nothing but laugh at her silly ass. I was really going to miss Coby. "Can you and Simba take some flicks together for me?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course! I can't wait to see Simba," I said.

"You just saw her a few weeks ago when she came to see me," she pointed out.

"Not the same," I said simply.

"Does your dude know you're coming home?" she asked.

"Nope. He's going to be very surprised."

"He's probably gon' faint, LaLa. Man, I gotta give it to him, he is a good-ass dude. I mean out of all the time you've been here, he's missed what? One weekend? Two at the most?" I nodded. "Man, if I could find a bitch that would be that loyal to me, I swear I would settle my ass down," she said dreamily.

"You will. Just let her find you, Coby. Don't just settle for the first thing that comes along."

"Right."

"Take my number down and call me whenever you want. Don't call me on that hot ass phone either. Call collect. That don't mean wear my shit out calling every damn day either. Be sensible," I said.

"How about every couple of weeks?" she suggested.

"How about once a month, unless you really need something?" I suggested in return.

"Sounds like a plan," she smiled. "Now get your ass up out my shit," she joked, as the officer came and unlocked the cell door. "Ay, Lala," she began, keeping her voice low. "About that chick that was gon' come to court against you, let that go," she advised. "She did what she was supposed to do. She came forward and told the truth."

"I feel you," I said simply. "I ain't tripping."

"Good," she smiled.

Her words rang in my ears as I exited the cell and walked down the corridor for the last time. *She came forward and told the truth.* I wasn't about to admit to a soul except Hitta

that I had killed Zeph. I had told Coby that I didn't do it and she believed me. I was cool with that.

"What is he doing here?" I asked my attorney as tears came to my eyes. My baby in all his thuggish glory, standing there with Catrell next to his Benz SUV. I ran and jumped into his arms. I kissed all over his face, and hugged him tightly.

"Auntie, LaLa!" Catrell called.

"Hi, Baby!" I said, letting go of Hitta and scooping my nephew up in my arms. He giggled as he threw his arms around my neck.

"Beyonce' is in jail," Catrell announced sadly.

"What?" I asked.

"Yeah. She was being bad," he explained.

I turned to look at Hitta for an explanation.

"She's not in jail, Babe. She's at the vet. She can come home later today," Hitta said.

"Beyonce' was being a ho, Auntie LaLa," Catrell stated. My eyes widened at his words.

"I'm sorry, um...what did you just say?" I asked.

"She was being a ho," he repeated.

"Where the hell did you learn that from?" I asked angrily. "And don't you ever let me hear you say it again!" He broke out crying like I had told him that Goldilocks and the three Pit Bulls were all found murdered in the forest.

"Babe, he's getting that from that place where your sister is. The kids is bad as hell up in there," Hitta explained quietly as my nephew continued to howl while telling my attorney that I yelled at him. I guess he wanted the man to put me back behind bars.

"Why is he even interacting with the kids? He's there to visit with Tina," I pointed out.

"Yeah, but I usually give her time by herself with him. They go to the little playground or whatever. He done said some worse stuff than that, LaLa," he said while shaking his head.

"I wish he would. He don't want that mouth washed out with no jail type soap. I sure will have Coby send me some!" I threatened. "Catrell, can we go home now?" I asked.

"No! I'm not going with you!" he said angrily.

"Okay, well let me get the guards so they can get you a little cell together," I said.

"Auntie LaLa," he said, with tears still running down his face.

"Yes?" I answered.

"I'm going home," he informed me, as if I wouldn't be joining him unless I could get my attitude together. He then walked to Hitta and leaned against Hitta's leg. "Is she coming?" Catrell asked Hitta. I almost bit my tongue trying to ask him what the hell he meant by that, then decided not to even entertain his nonsense.

"Catrell, be nice to Auntie LaLa," Hitta said.

"She yelled," he said accusingly.

"And you said a bad word," I informed him sharply.

"I'm sorry, Auntie LaLa," he said. "Are we cool?" he asked. I looked at Hitta, who simply shook his head in exasperation.

"Uh, yeah. I accept your apology." I wasn't about to tell this child that we were cool.

"Let's roll then," Catrell said, and waited to be lifted up into his car seat.

"Catrell, when we get home, we're going to spend some time just you and me, okay?" I said in mock happiness.

"Yes! Okay, Auntie LaLa! I'll say where," he informed me. I stared at him as if there were horns growing out of his head. He decided that further conversation with me was not needed, and fixed his attention on his iPad. He put his headphones on and started singing along to some songs while dancing in his seat. I was beyond irritated.

"Are you gonna ruin *all* the fun?" Catrell yelled while still in headphones.

"Are you gonna be able to walk home from here?" I mumbled.

"What'd you say, Auntie LaLa?" he yelled. "I can only see your lips moving, but I don't know what you said."

"Never mind, Catrell."

"Okay, Auntie LaLa, I'll never mind," he said and went back to his music.

"I really can't thank you enough," I said, shaking hands with my lawyer.

"That check is gon' be thanks enough," Hitta interjected, causing us to laugh. "Nah, for real though, Man, that was good lookin' out. I appreciate it."

"It was nice to meet you LaLa. You take care of yourself," he smiled.

"You too," I said.

I didn't even look back as we pulled away from the jail. There was nothing I wanted to see. The only thing I would miss about the place was Coby.

"Where do you want to eat, Baby?" Hitta smiled.

"I'll cook. Even restaurant food doesn't sound as good as a home cooked meal," I said.

"Take me to Taco Bell!" Catrell ordered.

"I thought you had on earphones," I commented.

"Taco Bell!" he repeated.

"No Taco Bell today, Bruh.

Auntie LaLa, I need Taco Bell!" he informed me.

"You don't *need* Taco Bell, you *want* Taco Bell. But not today. How about I make you some tacos instead?" I suggested.

"Okay, Auntie LaLa," he relented. "Are you home to stay?" he asked quietly.

"I'm home to stay," I smiled. He smiled back.

"Can you be nice?" he asked.

"Can you?" I countered, to which he slid his headphones back over his ears without answering.

"Don't let him fool you, Babe. He asked about you every single day, like ten times a day. I don't know how many times I had to sit him down and try to explain the situation," Hitta said. "He asked about Granny too. He wanted me to make him some greens but he said they had to taste like Granny's. My mom made 'em for him. He was really happy so I guess she did something right," he laughed.

"What's up with Tina?" I asked. My sister Tina was in a drug rehab program. She was only supposed to do six months, but ended up getting another three months for a dirty test. She swore somebody slipped her something, which may not have

been as farfetched as it sounded. Females are treacherous and hated to see someone else succeed at what they themselves were struggling to accomplish.

"She says she'll be graduating soon, and wanted to know if I would talk to you to see if you'd let Catrell spend the night with her sometimes," he said. "I told her that's something she needs to discuss with you herself. I don't want to get involved in that."

"By the way, Hitta, thank you for taking care of him all these months. I really appreciate that."

"Girl, that goes without even saying. Don't even mention it. I'm just glad you're home. I missed you a lot, LaLa. But we'll talk when we get back to your house, okay?"

"Okay, Baby. I love you," I said.

"I love you too, Babe."

"Now about this 'your house' stuff," I began hesitantly. "Maybe we should make 'my' house 'our' house now. What do you think? I mean, I know you'd have to commute to LA to go to the shop, but it's really not that far. You were practically doing that anyway so there won't be much difference."

"LaLa, we already talked about that while you were inside. I gave you my answer, and I don't want to talk about it again. Just let it go," he said. "When the time is right, it will happen."

*I was livid! How dare he get at me like that? He should be glad that I was willing to share my beautiful space with him! Well he could forget it! All offers were off! I stared out the window and tried to pretend like I wasn't bothered.*

"You okay?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I smiled. "Wow...I know I wasn't gone long, but everything looks so different to me."

"I bet it does. You didn't have any problems in there that you didn't tell me about right?" he inquired.

"Nope. Not a one," I assured him. I glanced back at Catrell who had stopped singing and was fast asleep. "He is knocked out!" I laughed.

"Yeah, and he'd be mad as hell if he knew you were laughing at him," Hitta smiled. "His little ass is a trip. He kept

me cracking up. My mama fell in love with him, Babe. You should have seen him with her. When he first met her he asked her if she would make him a peach cobbler and some ham 'hops'. She thought that was the cutest shit ever. She called all her friends and told them what he said. Catrell is a star in my fam, Babe," he laughed.

"Did she really make it for him?" I asked incredulously.

"Hell yeah, she did!" he answered. I fell out laughing. "She made him greens, ham hops, and mac and cheese. Then she made him a tiny peach cobbler just for him. He was so happy, Babe. It was the cutest shit ever."

"Please thank her for me," I said, getting a little misty-eyed. The mist turned to full-fledged tears as the familiarity of Pomona came into view. I couldn't stop thanking the Lord for my freedom.

"Are we there?" Catrell suddenly asked.

"Almost, Baby," I responded.

"Well how much longer?" he demanded.

"Just a little longer. Do you have something important to do?" I asked.

"Yeah, not ride in the car," he answered and put his headphones back on. Hitta looked quickly over at me, silencing me before I could respond.

"Babe, do you want to go to the mall now, or wait 'til later?" Hitta asked.

"To the mall for what?"

"Clothes, Baby. Don't you want new stuff?" he asked.

"No, that's not necessary. I wasn't even gone for a year. The stuff I have is fine," I assured him.

"That's cool. But we'll go in a few days and get you some new stuff too," he said with finality.

"Okay," I agreed.

## CHAPTER SIX

““We’re home! We’re home!” Catrell screeched with joy. I knew that he and Hitta were coming periodically just to check on the house, but I hadn’t realized how much he would miss it. It made me smile.

“Auntie LaLa, grab my bags!” he ordered as we pulled up in my driveway.

“I beg your little pardon, Hun! Grab your bags?” I repeated incredulously. It took Hitta a moment to stop laughing, but when he did, he informed Catrell that his bags were already in the house.

“How are his bags in the house, when I just found out this morning that I was getting out?” I asked.

“We knew yesterday,” Hitta said simply. Before I could pry further, he walked up to the front door and put his key in the lock. As soon as he opened the door, Catrell sped past us and into the house. I looked at Hitta and shook my head. “I know, Babe. Just be patient,” he encouraged me.

I walked in slowly, looking around. My eyes filled with tears that spilled over and ran down my face. I was home. I was really home, and I never wanted to leave again.

I nearly screamed when I felt something brush against my legs. It was Jay-Z. I bent down and scooped him up in my arms, not caring if he scratched me to death. He purred loudly

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

as he snuggled against my chest. Catrell stood staring at Jay-Z as if he felt the cat had somehow betrayed him. I set him down on the floor and he ran up the stairs, away from us worrisome humans.

"Come on, Babe," Hitta said, taking my hand and leading up the stairs. He led me straight to the walk-in closet, then turned on the light. He stood looking at me with a smile on his face as I took in all his clothes hanging in the closet, and boxes upon boxes of his shoes stacked on the shelves. I threw my arms around him happily as he laughed. "I told you when the time was right, it would happen."

"I just love you!" I exclaimed. "How long have you been here?"

"Only since yesterday. Your lawyer called me yesterday and said that you would more than likely be released today. He said he was going to ask you if you wanted to surprise me, but that we would surprise you by being there when you walked out. So yesterday, Catrell and I came back here, moved everything, and cleaned up real good." I couldn't stop smiling. "But I have something else for you." He led the way to my office, and opened the door. On the wall was a giant portrait of Hitta and Catrell, dressed alike in jeans, matching beige and blue button down shirts, and matching Timbs. In the picture, Catrell stood in front of a toy Benz SUV as Hitta stood in front of his real one. They pointed at each other as they smiled. It was the cutest thing I had ever seen.

On the adjacent wall was another oversized portrait of me and my brother Mali, taken as we stood and hugged in front of his home. However, in the portrait my brother had a pair of snow-white wings that were wrapped lovingly around me.

Hitta held me tightly as I cried like I had just found out all over again that my brother had been killed.

"It's so beautiful," I managed to say. "Thank you so much, Hitta."

"Do you like my picture, Auntie LaLa?" Catrell asked, coming into my office and staring up at himself.

"I love your picture, Baby!" I laughed.

"Hitta is on there too," he said dryly, as if Hitta was ruining the picture.

"I see. That makes it even more special!" I assured him. He stared up at me as if I had cursed, then turned and walked from the room.

After talking to Hitta a while longer, I walked back to my room, determined to take a long bath. I ran the water in the tub and added some bath gel. I stripped off my clothes and stepped into the tub, sitting down and sinking up to my chin. It was the best feeling I had ever felt...almost.

I soaked in the tub, then let the water out, hoping the smell of jail had gone down the drain. I then stood under the shower water and scrubbed my skin and hair. I was beginning to feel normal again.

By the time I stepped out, dressed, and made my way down the stairs, Hitta and Catrell were sitting in the living room building a giant structure out of Legos.

"Wow!!! What is that, Catrell?" I asked. "It's very nice!"

"It's a house, Auntie LaLa. You can live in it, and come see me and Hitta whenever you want," he said. Hitta started coughing uncontrollably. I decided not to respond as I stood staring down at my nephew, unable to believe that he would get at me in such a way.

"Baby, I'm going to pick up Beyonce'," Hitta informed me. "It'll give you some time with your nephew."

"Okay," I said skeptically, not sure if I wanted to be left along with the child of the corn. Hitta grabbed his keys, put a fitted hat on his head, kissed me lightly, and walked his fine ass out the door.

I took a seat on the floor where my nephew sat building the house meant for me to live in.

"So what's been going on Catrell? Did you miss me?" I asked.

"Yes, Auntie LaLa," he said. "I had Hitta with me."

"I know, Baby. I'm glad you had Hitta to take care of you. I don't ever want you to be alone. Hitta is a good friend, isn't he, Catrell?"

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

“Yep! He’s my best friend, Auntie LaLa, even before Beyonce’ and Jay-Z!”

“Wow!!! Hitta has certainly moved up the ranks huh?” I asked.

“A little,” he said simply. “Are you going to leave me again?” he asked, setting down his Legos and staring into my eyes.

“Never,” I promised, nearly choking on the lump forming in my throat. “I’m sorry I had to go away for a while, Catrell. I didn’t want to leave you. I just had to.”

“But not like Uncle Mali and Granny?” he asked quietly. A strange noise escaped my throat as I fought the urge to break down and cry.

“No, Baby, not like Uncle Mali and Granny. Not if I can help it. See, Catrell, Mali and Granny having to leave is a little different than when I had to leave.”

“What about Uncle Zeph?” he asked. “Did he have to leave?”

“Yes, he had to leave,” I said. “But the difference in them and Auntie LaLa, is that Auntie LaLa wasn’t taken away from the world. I was only taken away from you and Hitta for a while.” I could see the confusion on his face, and decided not to confuse him any further. “Just know that we all love you, Catrell, and none of us will have ever left you unless we have to.”

“Okay. Maybe I’m not mad at you anymore,” he said.

“That makes me very happy. Were you mad because I left?” I asked. He nodded. “You didn’t call me every night and say goodnight to Beyonce’ and Jay-Z. You didn’t take me to get leaves and rocks and sticks. And you wouldn’t let me come home.”

“It’s not that I didn’t want you to be at home, Catrell. But I needed Hitta to take care of you and he couldn’t do it from here at the time. We wanted you to be comfortable so we had you live in Hitta’s house for a while. Did you like it?” I asked.

“I liked it, Auntie LaLa, but not as much as my bed in my room in my house,” he explained.

"Okay. I'm sorry you had to leave your room, Catrell. But now you're back and that's all that matters. Right?"

"No. What matters is that my room doesn't like when I leave," he said.

"Oh. Well it should be happy that you're back," I said and quickly changed the subject. "How did you like your visits with Tina?" I asked gently.

"She's not like you and Hitta," he said simply.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"She doesn't make me laugh. And she didn't care about Beyonce' and Jay-Z. She was hungry all the time," he said, causing me to laugh.

"Hungry all the time? Well maybe she needs more food. We should take her some," I suggested.

"I gave her my two dollars from Hitta. It was my ice cream money. But she needed it," he said.

"Why did you give her your two dollars?" I asked.

"She asked for money, Auntie LaLa. Like when we give money to the men on the road with the signs," he explained.

"Not quite the same," I said, trying to hide my rising anger.

"Okay so, when do you want to go again?" I asked.

"I don't know. Her mouth moves scary," he said. "I don't like it. Like a Halloween pumpkin."

"A Halloween pumpkin???" I asked incredulously.

"Yeah. It's pretty scary. You probably shouldn't see it," he informed me.

"Okay. Well thank you for protecting me, Catrell, but I think we should probably keep going to see her, don't you?"

"No," he said simply.

"No? Is it because you don't like her mouth moving?" I asked.

"Yes. Some of that. And too because she smokes the dragon," he said, with his head down.

"Um...smokes the dragon? What does that mean, Baby?" I asked, thinking he was talking about cigarettes.

"She smokes the dragon smoke," he explained. "When the smoke comes from the dragon, she sucks it up."

“Where does she smoke the dragon smoke, Catrell?”

“When the lady brings it to her. Then we go walk and she smokes the dragon smoke.”

“What does the dragon look like, Baby?” I asked, trying to figure out what the hell he was talking about.

“Like a dragon, but it’s made of glass. And when she puts fire to it, it gets mad and puts out smoke and she smokes the smoke,” he said. “Then her mouth moves crazy. I don’t want to go back, Auntie LaLa.”

“Oh baby believe me, you will not ever go back there again,” I promised. “Have you told Hitta about the dragon?” I asked, trying to sound normal.

“No. Only you. Tina said the dragon is a secret,” he revealed conspiratorially. “I had to promise not to tell Hitta. But I can tell you, Auntie LaLa. Right?”

“Right, Baby. You can tell me anything. You know that,” I said, trying to blink back the angry tears that were threatening to form in my eyes. *How dare this crackhead-ass bitch smoke that bullshit in front of her son? I would be paying Tina a visit very soon, and she would not be happy to see me at all.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

I sat talking to my nephew about everything he had done while I was away. He told me that Hitta took him to see some fish and sharks, and that he had gotten to pet a baby goat. He told me that he had been to 'Knocks Berry Farm'.

"It's *Knott's* Berry Farm," I corrected.

"No, it was Knocks," he informed me. "Knocks Berry Farm."

"Oh, okay," I relented. "I must have been mistaken."

"Yeah, must have been," he agreed. "And I had a shit kabod," he said excitedly. It took everything in me not to fall out laughing.

"You mean a Shish Kabob," I quickly corrected.

"It was good, Auntie LaLa. Hitta was nice to me while you were gone," he said.

"I'm glad to hear that, Baby."

"But I still want you all the time," he said. I watched as he stood from the floor and walked over to me with his arms outstretched. I picked him up and hugged him tightly. I sat back down with him on my lap and we sat quietly for a while with his head on my chest.

"Auntie LaLa," he said.

"Yes, Catrell?"

"Do you not like the dragon smoke?" he asked.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"I hate the dragon smoke, Baby. And I want you to hate it too. It's really bad, and don't ever let anyone tell you it's not. Not even Tina."

"Okay. I hate it too," he said.

"Beyonce' can live in your house then," he said out of nowhere.

"She does live here, Catrell," I responded.

"No, the house I made for you," he clarified, pointing to the Lego house.

"Oh, I'm sure she would love it!" I said in mock excitement. As if on cue, Jay-Z came running down the stairs and jumped up on the couch next to us. He then jumped down and sniffed at the Lego house. He stuck his head inside and decided that it wasn't all that. He turned to look at us, then went back up the stairs.

A few minutes later, we heard Hitta's key in the door. He came in with Beyonce who looked like she had a cold attitude.

"Hi Beyonce'!" I said, to which she instantly lost the attitude and ran to me as fast as her little legs would carry her. She was very happy to see me, and I found myself happy to see her as well. She was spinning in circles and barking so loud that Jay-Z came back downstairs. They greeted each other as couples do, and ran up the stairs together so she could tell him about her experience at the vet. Catrell took off after them, wanting to know why Beyonce' had ignored him when she came in the door.

When Hitta came out of the restroom, I was sitting on the couch with a smile on my face. I was truly home. Kid screaming, dog barking, cat angry, and it didn't get any better than that. I couldn't have been happier. That is, until Hitta sat down next to me and sat staring into my eyes. I looked at the small red velvet box in his hand.

"I love you," he said. "I should have given this to you already, but I didn't get a chance. So now I'll do it the right way," he said, sliding down to the floor and onto one knee. "LaLa, you mean everything to me. I don't know what I did to

deserve you, but I'm glad I did it. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Will you marry me?" he asked.

"Yes, I'll marry you," I cried, wishing my family could be here to witness it. He slid the ring on my finger and I hugged him close.

"I'm hungry," Catrell announced from the bottom of the stairs. "I want an egg on the circle bread," he informed me as if we were at restaurant.

"It's called an English muffin," I smiled. He looked away from me and directed his attention to Hitta.

"I'm hungry," he told Hitta, "I want an egg on the circle bread." Hitta looked at me for assistance. *Don't look at me Bruh. You're probably the one that taught him about 'circle bread.'* He wasn't saying that shit when I left.

"We don't have any uh...uh..." Hitta stuttered looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I wanted to crack up laughing. "English muffins," he finally said.

"Oh," Catrell said. "I'll take a vitamin."

"Okay, we don't eat vitamins when we're hungry, we eat food, Catrell. A vitamin is not going to fill you up," I informed him.

"Hitta lets me eat the gummy vitamins, as many as I want!" he said angrily. I turned to glare at Hitta.

"Not true," he said in his defense.

"Are you hungry or not, Catrell? I'm not going to make you a bowl of vitamins. I will make you lunch though okay?" I reasoned.

"A turkey wing?" he asked.

"No," I said, and stood up to go to the kitchen. I looked in the refrigerator to see what was there. I closed the door and found some peanut butter and jelly and made him a sandwich. "Your lunch is ready, Catrell."

"What is it first?" he asked.

"Peanut butter and jelly," I said simply. "That's the kind of stuff kids eat for lunch, not vitamins and turkey wings. Now get to eating." He looked at me as if he wanted to protest, then changed his mind and climbed up into a chair. He kept his eyes on me the entire time. I simply stood there and stared back at

him. He wasn't about to punk me. I could just imagine what he had put my man through while I was gone.

"I have a question," Catrell said.

"What is it, Baby?" I asked.

"Can I have a brother?" he asked. My head quickly turned to Hitta's direction. Lord, how would I explain this one?

"How about a puppy instead?" Hitta suggested, to which Catrell jumped down from his chair and danced around in celebration.

"I get a puppy!" he laughed heartily.

"But you'll have to clean up after him, take him outside to use the bathroom, take him for walks, and make sure Beyonce' shares her food with him," Hitta said.

"No thank you," Catrell said, climbing back up on his chair. "Beyonce' doesn't share her food," he said haughtily. "And she doesn't share her walks; only with me and Auntie LaLa so we can pick up rocks and sticks."

"Good save, Babe," I whispered in admiration. Hitta winked at me.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

“Heyyyy, Boo!” I greeted when Simba answered the phone. “How are you?”  
“LaLa! What’s up, Girl? Welcome home!

When can I see you?”

“In the next couple of days, for sure,” I promised. I was standing on the balcony, gazing out at the night stars, and thanking God for my freedom. Hitta was inside with Catrell and I had finally gotten a moment to call my friend. “Girl, your little sister Coby is a mess!” I laughed. “I just love her!”

“Coby is like one cell away from being mentally ill!” Simba laughed. “She had me hollering on the phone talking about how you snatched that bitch Bria up against them bars. I can’t stand that ho, LaLa. She ain’t no good. You know she took that case for J-Bone, right?”

“Yes, Girl, Coby told me. So he’s sitting his gang-goofy ass at home while a bitch is doing time for him. I wish the hell I would have ever...the dick wasn’t that damn good!” I said, causing Simba to laugh. “She’s just as dumb as he is!”

“Girl, Coby gon’ end up beating that ass just like I did. Coby can’t stand for nobody to be in her business like that. Oh, and thanks for leaving her all your stuff, LaLa. That was so cool. She really took to you, and Coby don’t like nobody. She thought you were a real one though,” Simba said.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"I'm going to keep in touch with her, Simba. Maybe one day we can go see her together. I know they'll be moving her to prison when her trial is over, but we can make a day of it and drive to where ever she is," I suggested. "And let me know when you get ready to send her packages, okay? I'd like to put in some money on it."

"I sure will, girl. She is going to be so happy, LaLa. So, how is Hitta doing?" she asked. "I know he is so happy! Aww and little Catrell!!!"

"Girl, little Catrell is a grown-ass man!" I said, causing her to crack up laughing. "Hitta is fine. He moved in yesterday, and I swear I'm on cloud nine. Just the thought of having him here all the time makes me so happy. He is so good with Catrell, and my nephew needs a man in his life since Mali isn't here anymore." I blinked back the tears that sprang up to my eyes. I would never get over the death of my oldest brother Mali; plotted out and schemed by my other brother Zeph...the one I had shot and killed.

"I know, LaLa. I know how much all y'all probably miss Mali," she said sadly.

"Girl, so Kimmy really had a baby with J-Bone?" I asked. "Ain't that some shit?"

"Yes, Girl. I couldn't believe it either. These hoes act like he has the only dick in Cali. It's disgusting," she commented. "I see him every now and then."

"We most definitely need to link up soon. I have so much to talk to you about," I said.

"Just let me know when! You know I'll be waiting, Girl."

"Okay, Simba, let me get off this phone before Catrell runs my man away," I laughed, causing her to laugh too.

"Okay, Girl. Again, welcome home, Boo!" I ended the call and headed to Catrell's room, where Hitta was telling him about different kinds of cars. I smiled as I stood in the doorway.

"Hi, Auntie LaLa," Catrell said.

"Hey, Baby! I'm going to make dinner," I announced to him and Hitta.

"Okay, Baby," Hitta responded.

"Auntie LaLa, can I play in the back yard?" Catrell asked.

"Tomorrow," I promised. "It's getting dark already."

"I'm not scared. I have Beyonce'," he informed me.

"Tomorrow," I repeated.

"Okay. I need to put Beyonce's new house out there," he said.

"Oh, okay. Sounds important. We'll do it tomorrow for sure," I smiled.

I made tacos for dinner and we all sat down together like we used to.

"Catrell, do you want to say grace?" I asked.

"Yep!" he answered. "Hi God please bless the food and Beyonce' and Jay-Z. Please bless Auntie LaLa being back with me, and Uncle Hitta." My head snapped up at the same time as Hitta's. Our eyes met and we shared a smile. We quickly put our heads back down as Catrell wrapped up his prayer. "Oh, and bless Granny and Uncle Mali and Uncle Zeph," he added. "Ay-man."

"You okay, Babe?" Hitta asked, when I hadn't lifted my head at the same time as he and Catrell. I make sure my eyes were cleared of all signs of tears, then raised my head and nodded that I was indeed okay.

"That was a very nice prayer, Catrell! Thank you!" I said.

"Okay," he smiled happily, and went to dig into his food. He then stopped, and looked from his plate to Hitta's. "Make my plate like his!" he ordered. "He got much than me!"

"It's *more* than you, Catrell," I corrected.

"Yeah it is! You see it too! I want my plate like his!" he screeched and pouted in his chair.

"Catrell, Hitta is much bigger than you. He eats more," I pointed out.

"You mean *more* bigger! That's what you said! Not much, but more!" he said angrily.

"Well it depends on what you're trying to say, Catrell. Sometimes it's more, and sometimes it's much."

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"I don't like it! Do my plate with much!" he said and started crying. I was outdone.

"Catrell, get it together, Bruh," I said. "You cannot eat all that food that Hitta has on his plate. Together, Catrell and I looked over at Hitta's plate, lined with seven tacos. Hitta sat eating as if nothing was going on. "If you can eat the one you have, I'll give you another one," I reasoned.

"Okay," he finally agreed. "But next time make my plate like his," he said.

"I will not," I said simply. "And don't tell me what to do. Now eat," I ordered. He finished his one taco in record time and I made him another. He was only able to eat half.

"Damn, I'm full," he commented, looking at me across the table. I didn't even go through the whole 'what did you say' routine. I simply sat looking at him.

"Good. Get up and go to bed," I ordered. "I don't want to hear a word. No playing in your room, nothing. Just go to bed."

"But it's not late enough!" he said.

"Bye, Bruh. Have a good night. Now go!" I demanded. He looked helplessly at Hitta who sat looking back at him without a word. "When I come up there, you better be in your bed, Catrell."

"But why now?" he cried.

"I said go!" He quickly moved from the chair and ran toward the stairs. He stopped and looked back at me before he went up.

"I have to take a bath!" he yelled.

"I said go to bed," I repeated. "I'm not going to say it again." He promptly burst into tears.

"I'm sorry for saying damn, Auntie LaLa!" he pleaded through his tears.

"Goodnight," I said. He stomped up the stairs, his wails carrying back to my ears.

## CHAPTER NINE

I had cleaned up the kitchen and Hitta had gone to shower. I passed by Catrell's room on my way to mine, and quietly opened the door. He was wide awake, lying in his bed, staring at the door as if he were waiting for me. I went in and sat next to where he was lying.

"Catrell, I'm not about to let you walk around my house cussing like you're a grown man. You are a child, and you will stay in a child's place. I don't like it and I don't think it's cute. Remember that time you were in the bathtub and tasted the bubbles even after I told you not to. You cried because you couldn't get the taste out of your mouth. Wel, the next time you say a bad word, I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap and the taste may never leave. Got it?"

"I don't like soap!" he informed me.

"And I don't like cuss words!" I responded. "Now are we clear?"

"We're clear, Auntie LaLa," he said.

"Thank you. Good night."

"Can I get up?" he asked.

"Nope. Sorry, Bruh, but the punishment still stands."

"Then what was the talking for?" he demanded. I turned around and looked at him. "Good night, Auntie LaLa."

"Good night, Catrell. I love you."

"Love you too," he said.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

I waited until Hitta got out of the shower, then went and got in myself. When I got out, he was sitting in one of the chaise lounges in front of the fireplace in my room. No fire was needed. It was hot as hell in the room just from the body heat. I sat in the other chaise and let out a deep breath.

"Feels good to be home huh, Babe?" he smiled.

"Yes, it does," I smiled back. "Hitta, I need to talk to you about something really important."

"What is it?" he asked suspiciously. "You about to tell me you're leaving me for a bitch?"

"Where the hell did that come from, Fool?"

"I don't know. I've heard stories about jail," he mumbled.

"Hitta, no. It's not that."

I told him the story about the dragon smoke that Catrell had told me earlier. I told it the exact way that it was told to me, so that he could make his own deduction of what happened.

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?" he asked, being careful to keep his voice down. "This bitch was smoking dope with him right there?" I nodded.

"When you think about it, he was the perfect cover," I said. "Number one, those visits are barely even supervised by any staff from the place. The grounds are huge, and it probably just looked like she was taking her son for a walk, or to have a picnic in the grass."

"That's fucked up. I know that's your sister, LaLa, but she doesn't even deserve to have a kid. Like he ain't been through enough shit already, now he has a mental picture of his mom smoking crack in front of him," he ranted. "I wish he would have told me before. I wouldn't have kept taking him up there."

"He had to promise not to. I guess he was just excited to be trusted with a secret, because my granny, Mali, and I always told him not to keep secrets. He told me because I've always told him that he could tell me anything no matter what it is; that even if someone *made* him swear to keep a secret, that they didn't mean from his Auntie LaLa. He believes that. But I will be going to see Tina," I said.

La Donna Robinson

“Do you think that’s a good idea, Baby? I don’t want you in any trouble, and you aren’t always so good about keeping your temper in check,” he pointed out.

“I’m only going for one reason, Baby, and then I’ll leave,” I promised.

“What reason is that?” he asked skeptically.

“To tell her that I’m filing for permanent custody of her son,” I informed him. His mouth fell open.



## CHAPTER TEN

“I had a bad dream last night,” Catrell said, coming to stand at the entry to the kitchen.  
“What about, Baby?” I asked.

“There were monsters in my walls,” he informed me.  
“And they were making loud noises like zombies!”

“Like zombies?” I asked incredulously. “They were making noises like they were going to eat me!”

“Why didn’t you come get one of us, Catrell? We would have run them all away from your dreams,” I said.

“I did, Auntie LaLa. But they were in your room too! They followed me from my dreams! I went to your door but they were in there in your room!”

“Who was in her room?” Hitta asked, coming up behind Catrell and looking at me suspiciously. I rolled my eyes.

“The monsters that were making the noises. They were zombies and they were going to eat me! I went to Auntie LaLa’s door in the night and they were in there!” Catrell said excitedly.

It had taken me a minute to figure out what he was talking about, but Hitta realized it right away.

“Uh...you know what, Catrell,” Hitta began. “I bet it was all a dream, even the part where you went to Auntie LaLa’s door. Because you know I would never let any zombies or monsters just kick it in y’all’s room like that! And you know Beyonce’ and Jay-Z really wouldn’t go for it. They would have been going off up in here, Man,” Hitta said.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

“Right!” Catrell agreed excitedly. “Right! It was just a dream!” he said happily. I sighed in relief and silently thanked my man for getting us off the hook. I guess we were a little *too* happy to be back in each other’s presence again. We would have to be more careful...and quieter.

After breakfast, I gave Catrell a bath, then dressed him in a pair of jeans, a short-sleeve checkered button down, and his little Timberland boots. I told him to go get his jacket and his backpack.

“I’m going to see Tina today,” I informed Hitta. “Can you take Catrell with you?”

“Yep. No problem, Babe. Go handle that shit,” he said and kissed me.

After I got them out the door, I showered and dressed in a pair of white jeans, a pink top, and a pair of pink Timberland boots.

I drove the distance to where my sister was located, but was too early. I had about forty-five minutes to kill before visiting would start. I drove to the local Starbucks and ordered a flat white latte. I drove back to the program and waited in my car. I didn’t want to lose my temper with Tina and end up getting arrested or something. I started practicing what I would say, then quickly cleared my mind. I would say whatever came to my heart and mind.

“Hi, LaLa!” my sister sang happily, wrapping me in a tight embrace. I felt her ribs through the yellow tank top she wore. She had definitely lost weight since the last time I had seen her. “Welcome home, Baby Sister!” she said.

“Thanks, Tina,” I said.

“Let’s sit outside,” she suggested. I followed her out of the French doors and onto a large patio. The grounds looked like a park, with a playground in the distance for the children to play. There were benches placed strategically around the acreage, far from the eyes of those who were being paid to monitor those seeking rehabilitation.

I noticed that Tina kept looking back and making eye contact with a thin black girl who was visiting with her child and her child’s father.

"Let's walk instead, Tina," I said. "It's a beautiful day, don't you think?"

"Yes, it is!" she exclaimed. "We'll walk in a minute. Just let me sit for a second and catch my breath.

"Tina," the girl called. "My baby's father brought you that sandwich you asked for," she said conspiratorially.

"Oh, I brought her lunch," I interjected, indicating the bag sitting next to me. The girl and Tina exchanged a frustrated glance.

"That's cool, LaLa," Tina said. "I'll eat yours later on. I've been craving this sandwich for weeks!" she lied, reaching to get the bag from the girl.

"Let me taste it," I said, taking the bag from her. She practically ripped my hand off trying to take it back. "Bitch, bring your ass and your sandwich and let's walk," I ordered angrily. She looked at me with a tad bit of fear in her eyes, but got up and followed.

I glanced around at the few other visitors who had come in after me. They sat idly chit-chatting about this and that, oblivious to the angry black woman who was trying to get her sister out of ear's reach so she could let her have it.

"So you're back on that shit, huh?" I asked. I stopped walking and turned to face her.

"That's a lie!" she said, trying to sound appalled.

"Well let's share your special sandwich, Tina. Like you said, you can save this one for later."

"Uh...it's not big enough for both of us," she informed me.

"I don't eat much, Sis," I said persistently.

"It's mine!" she yelled. Her entire mood immediately changed back to normal. "You can get you something on the way home," she smiled.

"I hope you choke on that shit you lying ass bitch," I said angrily. "If you want to smoke until the shit is coming out your eyeballs that's your business, but how dare you do that shit in front of Catrell?"

"I didn't smoke in front of him!" she lied.

"Liar," I said simply. "But you won't ever get the chance to do it again, Tina. He will not be back."

"Don't do that, LaLa! I don't know what he thought he saw, but I wasn't smoking in front of him!"

"Bitch, your son thinks you're a dragon. Is that really okay with you?" I asked.

"LaLa, his imagination..."

"Shut the hell up, Tina. You are sick. And you need more than this little Snoopy summer camp to heal your sickness."

"He is lying!" she yelled. "I am not smoking!"

"Then give me that bag," I challenged. "You take this food and let me have yours," I said.

"No," she refused. "Like I said, I've been wanting this sandwich for weeks!"

"Okay. You enjoy your sandwich, Hun. That sandwich is about to cost you way more than those little pennies you gave that bitch to have her man bring you that Arm and Hammer baking soda. I'm filing for custody of Catrell, Tina. Permanent custody."

"You are not getting my baby!" she informed me. She was livid, but not enough so to let go of that bag. She held it so tightly that her knuckles were turning white. "I mean it, LaLa, don't take my baby!" she cried.

"What would you do with him, Tina? Try to sell him again in hopes of buying another *sandwich*?" I asked.

"Your judgmental ass makes me sick!" she said. "I was an addict!"

"Was?" I asked incredulously.

"I don't smoke anymore! I am recovered!" she said haughtily.

"Yeah, recovering from that last hit," I said sarcastically.

"You and your gang-bangin' ass man ain't getting my son, LaLa!" *Okay li'l bitch, don't get besides your bony-ass self. Watch how you talk about my baby.*

"Well maybe you'd like for your husband the businessman to get custody. I bet you two together would have

more sandwiches than you'd know what to do with. Just rich in sandwiches!" I said in mock happiness.

"Why don't you have your own baby and leave mine alone?" she asked in anger.

"Why don't you have your own...and leave *mine* alone?" I countered.

"LaLa, I'm begging you. Please don't. I'll be out of here soon and I can get him as soon as I leave here. I promise."

"Bye, Tina. Enjoy your sandwich," I said and walked away, leaving the bag I brought for her sitting on the bench. I knew in my heart she would never even open it. I figured she would follow me, ranting and raving the entire way. However, I was wrong. When I turned around, she was sitting on the bench, tearing through the bag in search of her 'sandwich'.

As I passed by the table where the girl sat with her baby's father, I saw her reach in her baby's diaper and pull out a zip-lock bag. She quickly tucked it into her pants. Her baby's father's eyes met mine and he quickly looked down at the table. I kept it pushing. My business there was done.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

When I left Tina, I got on the freeway and headed to Los Angeles. It took me exactly forty-three minutes to reach the street my friend lived on. I turned onto her block and parked in front of her house.

"Surprise, bitch! Guess who's here?" I laughed. She came flying outside.

"LaLa! Give me a hug!" she said, opening my car door. I got out and hugged her. It seemed like Simba had just gotten more beautiful since I had last seen her.

"We have a lot of pics to take for Coby," I informed her. "I promised."

"Girl, I promised too!" she laughed. "With her worrisome ass. She called and asked if I had seen you yet."

"Well if you don't have any plans today, we can take some pictures for her, go get them printed, and then mail them. But I need a nail salon and a good wash and flat iron," I informed her, swinging my ponytail.

"You know I'm rolling with you! Let me get my purse! Come on in for a sec," she said. I followed her into the house. Thank god there were no angry thugs sitting around interrogating me this time. She went to her room and came out carrying a grey and black Michael Kors bag that matched her black and grey outfit. "Today is on me; hair, nails, feet, all of it. Welcome home. Now let's go," she ordered.

"And lunch will be on me," I interjected.

"No, it won't," she argued. "I said *today* is on me," she clarified.

"I love you, girl."

"Love you too, LaLa."

"Let's stop by the shop real quick," I suggested. "Hitta doesn't know I'm here and I probably should let him know."

"Yeah, you should. Especially the way shit goes down around here. He needs to know every time you set foot to come out here, LaLa."

"I know. But I didn't even know I was coming. I went to see Tina and it didn't take as long as I thought it would, so I came to see you right after," I explained.

"Is he going to be mad, Girl?" she asked.

"Yep," I answered. "Pissed." We looked at each other and fell out laughing.

I parked the car and got out. Simba chose to wait in the car. I walked to Hitta's office and knocked on the closed door. I could hear him laughing on the other side. He came and opened it, wearing a wide smile that quickly faded when he saw me standing there. I looked past him at the woman sitting in the chair across from his desk.

"Just wanted to let you know I'm in LA. I'm with Simba," I informed him and turned to leave.

"Babe, wait. I want you to meet somebody," he said, pulling on my arm. "LaLa, this is Tanazha. Tanazha, this is my fiancée LaLa."

"It's nice to meet you," she said nervously. But what should she be nervous about?

"Nice to meet you as well. Well have a good day. See you soon, Baby," I said, and again turned to leave.

"LaLa, wait, Babe. Come here," he said, sitting down in his chair and holding out his arms. I walked into them and he pulled me down onto his lap.

"What's wrong, Hitta? And where is Catrell?" I asked. At that moment, Catrell came into the room, with a boy about his same age trailing behind him. He was adorable, and had a familiar look about him. I just couldn't for the life of me figure

out why. I glanced at Hitta who was watching me intently. A second boy, much smaller than the first, brought up the rear.

"Babe," he began gently.

"Auntie LaLa!" Catrell exclaimed happily.

"Hi, my baby!" I said.

"I'm fixing cars," he informed me, hugged me, then walked out with his friends.

"I'm sorry, Baby," I said to Hitta. "What were you saying?" I quickly glanced at the woman who was sitting there watching us with a very pained look in her eyes.

"LaLa, those little boys you just saw are Tanazha's sons," he began.

"Are you about to tell me those are your kids?" I asked, jumping up. I then turned to look at the woman who was shaking her head no.

"No, Babe. Just listen, Man," he said in frustration. "Bring your ass back here." I reclaimed my seat on his lap. "LaLa, those are Tanazha's sons."

"You said that already," I interrupted irritably.

"The oldest one's name is Malachi," he said quietly.

"Aww really?" I asked. "That's my brother's name," I informed the woman with a smile. She nodded.

"I know," she smiled.

"How do you know?" I asked in confusion. "How does she know?" I asked Hitta. *So help me God if I find out he's fucking with this bitch...*

"Babe, Mali is his father," Hitta said quietly. I stared at him in disbelief, then turned toward the woman. She nodded. That's why the boy looked so familiar to me. Tears sprang up to my eyes, and I couldn't help but cry as I laid my head on Hitta's shoulder. He rubbed my back.

"Why didn't he ever tell me?" I asked.

"He didn't know," Hitta said. "She moved to Atlanta before she found out she was pregnant."

"Okay, but when you did find out," I said, turning to face her. "Why didn't you say anything to my brother? He could have had the opportunity to be a part of his son's life."

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"I know," she said sadly. "I just never thought...I wanted to tell him but..."

"Okay, damn all the excuses. How old is he?" I asked.

"He's about to be four," she said. He was the same age as Catrell. Probably younger by only a few months. Catrell had just turned four.

"Do you live here now?" I asked. She nodded. "My whole damn family is dead," I informed her. She nodded. "My grandmother would have loved to know her other great-grandson. And I'm sure even Zeph would have loved to know he had a nephew, but how could you keep my brother's son from him?" I asked.

"I didn't keep him from Mali intentionally," she explained. "I guess I just didn't want to go through the whole 'that's not my baby' thing, you know? LaLa, your brother didn't love me like I loved him. I mean, we dated but we weren't in a serious relationship and he never would have believed me. We had sex once and once only. I met him right here at this shop, which is why I returned here today. I brought his son to meet him today, and Hitta told me that Mali is gone," she said. "Now I wish I would have told him," she said sadly.

"It's okay," I said, surprising Hitta who must have thought I was about to bang on the woman. "You still have me and Hitta. I would love to have a relationship with my nephew. He looks like Mali," I said, blinking back tears.

"Yes, he does. But that's not all, LaLa," Hitta said. "Let me tell you about the other boy, Babe."

"Oh, okay. How old is he?" I asked, wondering why I needed to know the history of this ho's entire fam.

"He's two," she informed me, staring down at her hands.

"That's nice," I said simply.

"That's not all," Hitta said quickly. "Umm...the other baby's father is-"

"Negro, if you say you I swear I'm going back to prison today," I said angrily.

"Babe, stop! It ain't me, Man," he argued.

"It's Zeph," Tanazha said quietly. It took me a moment to digest what she had said.

"Well damn," I said. "No wonder you kept that shit a secret."

"LaLa," Hitta interjected, trying to calm me down. "Just hear her out, Babe."

"Fuck all that. Did he know?" I asked. She nodded. "So you told Zeph, but didn't tell Mali?" Again, she nodded. "Did you know they were brothers?" I asked. Another nod. "So, it doesn't bother you that your children are brothers and cousins?"

"LaLa, come on, Babe," Hitta said. He knew that once I got started, it was a wrap.

"But why tell Zeph and not Mali?" I asked angrily.

"Because...well..." she stuttered.

"And why wouldn't Zeph tell Mali?" I asked, looking at Hitta for an answer. "Oh never mind, I forgot what kind of man he was." I watched her cringe at my emphasis on the word 'was'.

"Zeph understood me a little better than Mali did," she explained. "He was easier to talk to. We had more of a real relationship than Mali and I did."

"That's some real relationship," I said sarcastically. "He kept you secret from his family. Both of them did. But my brothers always did know what kind of girl *not* to bring home to Granny. I turned to face Hitta once again. "And what part does your ass play in all this?" I asked, waiting on him to give the wrong answer.

"I don't play any part, Babe. She came here to see Mali and I told her what happened. I had never met her before today," he explained.

"Mali didn't even tell his best friend about you," I informed her. "Were you mad that he kept you a secret? Is that why you fucked his little brother?" I asked, watching her squirm uncomfortably in the chair. "See, for some reason, Zeph was always in constant competition with Mali. So if he had any clue that you were fucking with Mali, that's the reason why he fucked with you, and that's the reason why he kept Mali's son a secret from him. He probably loved the thought of having that

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

over Mali's head. So it was nice to meet you, and thank you for contributing to the demise of my already fucked up family. Much appreciated." I stood to leave and Hitta grabbed my hand.

"LaLa, come on, Babe. What's done is done," Hitta said. "Regardless of how it happened, you have two new nephews who deserve their family." *I hated when he made sense!* I sat looking at him defiantly. I wasn't mad at the kids; I was mad at this ho sitting there trying to look like she was the victim. Lying ass slut.

"Do I get to meet them or do I just get to glance upon them from a-fuckin-far?" I asked angrily.

"Of course you can meet them," she said eagerly. She got up to call them."

"Can you call Catrell too?" I asked. She did. He came in looking at me curiously, probably wondering why I was intruding on his playtime.

"Come here, Catrell," I said. He came and stood next to me. I looked at the woman expectantly. *Bitch, start talking!* I yelled in my mind.

"Malachi, Marshay," she began. "This is your Auntie LaLa." I gazed upon the handsome little faces who resembled my brothers in exact duplication.

"No, it's not!" Catrell yelled angrily.

"Catrell, these are your cousins," I explained. "Uncle Mali had a son, and so did Uncle Zeph. These are their children, which makes them your cousins. So now you have to share Auntie LaLa, Baby."

"Hitta!" Catrell called, and burst into tears. Hitta moved me to the side and picked up a very much pissed off Catrell in his arms. There was no consoling him. He didn't want to hear a damn thing I had to say. He hid his face in Hitta's neck and continued to scream.

"Catrell," Hitta said softly. I could see he was trying not to laugh. "Auntie LaLa isn't leaving or anything. But wouldn't it be cool to have some little boys to play with sometimes. You can introduce them to Beyonce' and Jay-Z. And we can all go places together sometimes." Catrell didn't disagree, but he wasn't about to agree to the shit either. He lifted his head and

looked at me accusingly. I dared a sympathetic smile in his direction.

"See, Baby? Now you have some more family besides Hitta and me! They can come spend the night and you can camp out in your room with them!" I suggested in mock happiness. He nodded hesitantly.

I made my way around the desk and squatted in front of the two boys. It was a real fight to keep the tears from coming, and it could be heard in my voice as I spoke.

"Hi Mali, Hi Marshay," I smiled. *At least the ho had enough sense not to name them both after my brothers.* They stood looking at me, wondering who in the hell I was. "I am your Auntie LaLa," I said quietly, hoping Catrell wouldn't hear me. He would go the hell off all over again. I dared a glance at him. He was straining to hear every word, but Hitta was talking to him and I was glad. I hugged them both, then turned to face their mother. "Where are you staying?" I asked. "I know you just got back. Have you been able to find an apartment or something?"

"I'm looking for an apartment. I'm staying with my sister right now. But it's a little too crowded up in there with her man and her four kids. It's only a two bedroom," But as soon as I find something, I'm gone," she informed me.

"I have somewhere you can stay," I said. "I'm sure that one of my brothers told you about my granny. She died not too long ago and she left me her house. I was planning on renting it out anyway so I may as well rent it to you." I watched a sense of relief wash over her and she seemed to relax a little. Hell nine people in a two-bedroom apartment will stress anybody out.

"Thank you so much. How many rooms?" she asked excitedly. Before I could answer, she had another question. "How much is the rent?" she asked a little hesitantly. "I still have to find a job, although I do have some money saved up. I could probably afford twelve hundred until I find a job."

"It's a four bedroom, two bathroom. It has a big front and back yard. It was renovated about two years ago so it's in really good shape. I will accept nine hundred and fifty until you

find a job. After you find a job, you can pay eleven fifty a month."

"Girl, are you serious?" she asked happily. "For a four bedroom?"

"One thing though," I said, before she could get too happy. "Nobody, and I do mean nobody except you and your kids can live there. You cannot rent out the extra room or rooms, however you decide to do it. I'm doing this for you because you have my nephews. I'm not doing it so it can be a lay-up spot for some non-working, video game playing thug."

"Oh girl, I don't plan on having no company," she informed me.

"That would be your business. I said no one *lives* there except you and your children," I repeated. "Now I really have to go," I informed them, turning to face Hitta. "Simba is in the car."

I hugged and kissed him, then hugged Catrell.

"I'm proud of you, Babe," Hitta said. "I love you."

"I love you too. See you when you get home. Give her my number." He nodded. "Bye boys!" I said. One of them waved. The other just looked at me, still trying to figure out what was going on.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“Dang, Girl. Was y’all in there doing it or what? It took you long enough,” she commented.

“You’re not going to believe it, Simba,” I said, blinking back eyes full of tears. I was just getting ready to tell her the 411 when Hitta came out, walking up to my car. I got out.

“Hey, Simba!” he called. She waved and smiled. “You okay, Babe?” he asked, hugging me tightly.

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “That was quite a blow, Hitta. Maybe that’s why people always say to call before you show up at somebody’s spot huh? At least if I had called, you could have warned me,” I said, causing him to laugh.

“I’m glad you didn’t call. I love when you surprise me, Babe. Where y’all headed to?” he asked.

“Hair and nail salon,” I responded.

“Ooo thank god! That head though, Babe. I didn’t want to be the one to say it, but damn!” He laughed.

“You shut your silly ass up!” I demanded, looking around to see if anyone had heard. He pulled out his wallet and handed me three hundred dollar bills.

“This one is on me, Beautiful. *Please* let them do that hair.”

“I don’t need your little crooked-ass thug money! You know I keeps my own, and besides, Simba is paying today, with your know-it-all ass!”

“Ay Simba, good looking out!” he yelled, pointing at my head. She fell out laughing.

“Real funny,” I said sarcastically. “Point at my head now, because won’t be no use in you pointing at it later, Bruh! I want you to remember how you talked about this head when you want some of it later!”

“Girl, don’t be saying that shit!” he said looking around. “So that’s how you gon’ act?”

“Never, Baby,” I smiled. “I have to go. Simba has been waiting long enough,” I informed him.

“Do you want me to help her move?” he asked.

“Yes, Baby. Help her move her stuff. I guess we’ll have to get her some furniture and stuff. After I donated Granny’s stuff to the church, there’s not much left. I’ll probably take her tomorrow to look at some stuff. Let her know, Babe. And tell her to call me,” I said, and kissed his beautiful lips.

“LaLa, be sensible, Babe. I know you’re just being generous and all, but don’t let nobody take advantage of you. Get her the basics. She can get the rest after she gets a job,” he pointed out. “I mean, she seems cool and all, but there’s a reason why neither Mali or Zeph told us anything about her. We’ll give her the benefit of the doubt, but keep your eyes wide open.”

“I will, Baby,” I promised. “And if she tries to make you baby-daddy number three, let me know so I can whoop her ass,” I said, and was dead serious. “I don’t trust her.”

“Babe, stop,” he said, trying not to laugh. “I’ll see you when I get home.”

“Okay, Baby.” I got in my Charger and cranked it up.

“I’ll be so thankful when I find myself a good-ass man like that, LaLa. These clowns that I date are like some damn jokes. Sometimes when I’m out with them, I look around to see if we’re on some hidden camera show,” Simba said in exasperation. I was hollering laughing.

I put on my seat belt, made sure everyone in a mile radius could hear *Young Note* blasting “I’m Straight” through my speakers, and pulled out of the lot. Simba reached over and turned it down.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on with you, LaLa? Bitch, you are gripping that wheel like your life is depending on it, and you're speeding! What the hell happened back there?" Simba asked. I took a deep breath.

"There was a woman in there when I walked in," I began.

"Well you sure were nice for a bitch that's being cheated on!" she said.

"Not like that, Simba. She had her two little boys with her. One of them was Mali's son," I managed to say before she interrupted.

"Mali has a son? And you never told me? He never said a word to me!"

"I didn't know. Hell he didn't know. But that's not all. The other little boy was Zeph's," I said, shaking my head in despair. "The boys are brothers."

"Bitch, you are lying!" she exclaimed. "She had babies with both of your brothers?"

"Yeah," I said wearily. "The cutest boys you've ever seen in your life, Simba. They are so precious."

"Damn, LaLa. That's fucked up though. They're brothers...but they're also cousins," she pointed out.

"Exactly," I agreed.

"Zeph knew about both of them. He knew about his son but never said a word. He also knew about Mali's son, but didn't tell him," I explained.

"So he was aware of Mali's son, but didn't ever say anything?" she asked.

"Right. Never said a word. What I don't get is why he didn't tell us about *his* son though. It hurt my heart, Simba. Here I am thinking I had no more fam, and all along I have two nephews that I didn't even know existed. That's fucked up. Zeph never ceases to amaze me," I said angrily.

"Who was with her first?" she asked.

"Mali," I said simply. "But you know Zeph the competitor."

"How old are they?" she inquired.

"Three and two," I answered. "My granny would have spoiled those boys rotten, Simba. But this chick, the mother, she chose to tell Zeph about his son and Mali's too. But she didn't tell Mali about either one. I'm so disgusted with her. I'm going to let her live in Granny's house, because those are my nephews and I want them to be okay no matter what. But I won't be having too many dealings with her. I just can't. I don't like her get-down. Her reasons were lame as hell and I'm not sure I'm buying that bullshit. She claimed to have been in love with Mali, but it sounds like it was Zeph she was really in love with."

"Girl, was Catrell in there?" she asked. She already knew how my nephew could act out.

"I thought he was going to break out with a baby gun and shoot my ass. He was livid when he heard her tell them that I'm their Auntie LaLa. He screamed for Hitta, girl and wouldn't even talk to me."

"He ain't trying to share his Auntie LaLa!" Simba laughed.

"Simba, if it wasn't for me, Hitta, the dog, and the cat, he would think the world stopped existing. He and that dog are a mess, Girl. They drive me crazy. She guards him like she's getting a paycheck every two weeks or something. Oh, but this isn't all I have to tell you. Girl, hold on to your weave, 'cause it's about to blow right out the window." I fell out laughing as Simba placed one hand on top of her head to hold her weave down, and put the window up with the other.

"Okay, Boo, I'm ready," she informed me.

I told her about Tina, the program, Catrell, and the dragon smoke. Back in the days, this would be a conversation for me to have with my play-sister Sin, but she turned out to be a snake in fly-bitch's clothing and ended up getting killed.

"You're lying, LaLa! No damn way was she getting high in front of that baby!" she said sadly.

"She was," I confirmed, and continued to tell her about my visit that very morning.

"Damn. That's some cold shit, LaLa. So you're going to get Catrell?" she asked.

"I sure am. And I'll get the other two boys too if I find out their mama is no good. I don't play about my fam, Simba. You already know."

"You know I do," she agreed. "I just feel bad for Mali. He died never even knowing about his son."

"That's how a dirty bitch does. She ain't shit, and Zeph ain't no better. He never even thought about me or Granny. Zeph and the bitch are responsible for that oldest boy never meeting his daddy. He has me though, and I wish the tramp would try to keep me away. I'd follow her ass all over the country if I had too. Those boys need to know their family."

We pulled up into the parking lot of the salon. I was more than ready. I looked a hot mess, and my nails needed immediate attention.

We entered and told the lady what we wanted. I had my hair washed, blow dried, and flat ironed, then went and got my nails done while my feet were soaking in a whirlpool bath. I was so relaxed I could have fallen asleep.

I chose a gel polish called Tahiti Sunrise for my nails and feet. When I was done, I got my eyebrows arched, and waited patiently for a cussing Simba to stop arguing with the lady about taking too much off her eyebrows. She paid and we were on our way. I couldn't believe that three hours had passed so quickly.

It was only one thirty in the afternoon and the day was young. I glanced over at Simba who was quite irritated as she stared into her mirror, attempting different strategies to make her brows look fuller.

"They look fine, Simba. People will only notice if you tell them," I reassured her.

"Promise!" she exclaimed.

"I promise. You look great, Boo."

"Okay. I'll take your word for it," she relented. "I better not be walking around looking like I'm constantly asking a damn question though! That lady pissed me off!"

"I know, Simba. But you look beautiful, as always."

"Thanks, Boo. Where are we eating?" she asked.

"Where ever you want to go. What do you feel like eating?"

"You decide," she said with a wave of her hand. She was still furious about her eyebrows and nothing I said would fix it.

"Okay how about McDonald's," I suggested.

"That's cool," she said distractedly.

"You hate McDonald's!" I exclaimed.

"McDonald's?" she asked incredulously. "Ain't nobody eating that crap!" I looked at her and shook my head.

"Girl, get over the eyebrows already! We have stuff to do and your damn eyebrows are not about to ruin it all!"

"Okay. So where to?" she asked.

"I'm not even hungry anymore," I stated. "Let's do lunch on another day."

"You sure?" she asked. I nodded. "Okay. So you going back home now?"

"No, we can still hang out. I'm just not hungry, but if you are I'll go with you. I just don't want anything," I explained. I sat thoughtfully for a moment. "Simba, how do you feel about going to pick up the kids from Hitta, and taking them out somewhere?" I asked skeptically.

"Girl, yeah, that's cool. Let's go get them. Do you think they're still there?" she asked. I called Hitta. His sexy voice came through loud and clear over the car speakers.

"What's wrong, Babe?" he asked. "Did something happen?"

"Is Tanazha still there?"

"Yeah, they're getting ready to leave right now. Guess who's a godfather?" he asked. I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Catrell?" I asked sarcastically, causing him to laugh.

"That's real funny," he laughed.

"Tell home girl to find her something to do. And for the record, it will not be you. I want to come get all the kids. Can you ask her if that's okay?" I could hear him asking her if she was alright with that.

"That's cool, Babe. She said she could use the break," he informed me.

"I'm on my way," I said. "Be there shortly. Make sure Catrell is ready to go, Babe. I don't have time for him to be trying to find out where we're going, if there'll be Gummy bears, and if I'm going to be nice," I said in exasperation. He was hollering laughing.

"Okay. I'm on it," he said. "See ya' in a minute, Beautiful." He ended the call and I headed back to the car shop.

"I knew it was bothering you," Simba commented. "You don't ever pass up no food. Those boys are going to love you, LaLa," she smiled.

"Wait 'til you see them, Simba. They are so freaking cute, Girl. It's funny, because now that I think about it, they look like they could be Catrell's brothers. They all look alike. But little Mali looks so much like his dad. It's crazy, Simba."

"Who is this bitch?" Simba asked. "Where'd she come from?"

"I don't know. Her name is Tanazha and she just moved back here from Atlanta."

"I ain't ever heard of no damn Tanazha," Simba said with an attitude.

"I said the same thing, Simba. And if those boys didn't look exactly like my family, I'd be a little skeptical. But there's no doubt that they are my brothers' kids."

"What did Hitta say?" she asked.

"Hitta is a real dude, Simba. You already know. He's going to bend over backwards to make sure those kids have everything they need. You know how he was when it came to Mali. Those are his godsons now, and nobody is going to tell him any different," I smiled.

We pulled up at the shop and Simba and I got out. We went inside, passing by a few of the workers. One in particular was completely enthralled in watching Simba switch across the lot. She looked at him and smiled. He waved.

"Go talk to him, Simba," I encouraged her.

"What if he has a woman?" she asked.

"What if he doesn't?" I countered. "You won't know until you ask."

"He is so fine, LaLa," she blushed.

"Girl, come on," I said, changing my path to the one that led to the worker. He smiled as we approached.

"Wha'd up, LaLa? Long time no see, Girl," he said, looking at Simba the entire time.

"Hey Mack. This is my friend Simba. Simba this is Mack." He wiped his hands on a towel and reached out to shake Simba's hand. "Mack, do you have a girl?" I asked. He shook his head no. "You better not be lying. This is my *good* friend."

"I ain't lying, LaLa," he laughed. "Damn, can I get the benefit of the doubt?"

"The benefits aren't my business, Bruh. But I do have doubts about your shady ass," I joked. "Just kidding, Mack. I'm going to see Hitta. 'I'll be right back, Simba.'"

The bitch was hypnotized. She didn't even look in my direction. Just stood there with that dumb ass smile on her face like a sixth-grader with her first crush.

"Hey, Baby," I called, walking into Hitta's office. He was going through some papers on his desk, and Tanazha was wiping the faces and hands of the two boys. Catrell came into the office from the work area. He had grease on his face, dirt on his hands, and some brown mucky stuff on his boots. I gasped. Hitta fell out laughing. "Babe! You better do something, Hitta. He is not going with me looking like he just got done replacing somebody's engine!"

"Told ya," Catrell said, turning to look at Hitta.

"Told him what?" I asked with a semi-attitude. Catrell decided to plead the fifth, and walked over to stand by Hitta. "Babe, can you clean him up some please?" I asked.

"Come on, Bruh," Hitta said, leading him to a wash room.

"I look fine!" Catrell turned and said.

"Who are you talking to though?" I asked. He closed the door. I settled my eyes on my two nephews. "Hey boys," I said.

"We going too?" Marshay asked. He looked so much like Zeph. I smiled.

"Yep. Want to hang out with your Auntie LaLa for a while?" I asked. He stood staring at me.

"Yes," Little Mali answered for himself and his brother.

"I won't keep them long," I said to Tanazha. "We'll probably go get pizza or something like that. Then go to a park maybe. I'll call you and let you know exactly where though, okay?"

"Girl, don't worry about that. I think it's pretty cool that you're even willing to spend time with them," she said.

"Tanazha, I don't know how much my brothers told you about me, or if they did at all, but I love my family no matter what. These boys are a part of my family. I don't like how you went about it all, but dwelling on it isn't going to change anything," I said. "Did Hitta give you my number?"

"Yeah, he gave it to me," she said.

"Good. Umm...where do you want me to drop the boys off when we're done?" I asked.

"Oh, girl, you can bring them back here. I'll just wait right here," she said.

"We're going to be a couple of hours," I informed her, looking at her strangely.

"I know. It's okay," she said with a wave of her hand.

"Yeah...uh...no. It's really not," I smiled. "I'm sure my fiancé has a ton of work to do and we've taken up a lot of his time already. We should probably let him get back to work," I suggested, giving her a look that said it was not up for discussion.

"You're probably right," she agreed.

"I usually am," I said sarcastically. *Bitch I'm cool with these kids, but I'll twist your ass up like a pretzel about my man.*

Hitta came out looking back and forth between us, then looked at me questioningly.

"How is this?" Catrell asked, showing me his face.

"That's great, Baby! What did you do with Catrell?" I asked him, causing him to giggle. "This isn't my nephew right here!"

"It's me, Auntie LaLa! I'm just clean now!" he laughed.

"Oh, okay! That is you!" I agreed. "You ready to go?"

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"Where to?" he asked. "Is it far?" I looked at Hitta who was trying his hardest not to laugh.

"I haven't decided where we're going yet, Catrell, but it won't be far."

"No bears?" he asked.

"No bears," I said with finality. He turned to look at Hitta for some backup. Hitta shook his head and shrugged. "Lord, give me strength," I mumbled.

"Amen," Catrell said. I couldn't even get annoyed. He knew to say amen any time the Lord's name was mentioned. Granny had taught him well. Hitta looked as if he were about to burst wide open with laughter, but knew he better continue to hold it in.

"Hitta, let me talk to you for a second," I said, grabbing his hand and pulling him into the wash room.

"I like this spontaneous type-shit, Babe," he said, trying to push me up against the wall. "You should do this more often."

"Boy, get your big-head ass off me!" I snapped. "That is not what I called you in here for!"

"Oh, my bad. What's wrong, Babe?" he asked. I shook my head.

"Hitta, Tanazha said that she wanted to wait here for us to get back," I began.

"That's not gon' work," he said. "I got a lot of shit to do, Babe."

"Right. That's what I told her. She's not going to be showing up here every time she has a spare moment. I'm not for no bullshit, Hitta. You better let her know so I won't have to. If she wants to bring the boys to see you, she can bring them to the house to see 'us.'"

"I get it, Babe," he said. "But you know I ain't above checking nobody, and I will if I have to."

"That's why I love you," I said, and kissed his lips.

"You sure that's all you want to do?" he asked seductively.

"Positive," I said, and opened the door. "I'll make it up to you later," I promised. "Okay *everybody*, let's go so Hitta

can get back to work.” Tanazha stood too, and followed us out the door. “You’re welcome to come with us if you want,” I offered.

“That’s okay, Girl. It’ll give me some time to get some things done. Let me give you my sister’s address,” she said. I typed it into my phone.

“I almost forgot! Do you have child seats in your car?” I asked. She nodded.

“I was about to remind you,” she laughed.

“Say bye to mom!” I cheerily told the boys after everybody was strapped in. We sat waiting for Simba to return, and soon saw her twisting her ass across the lot.

“Oh my god, Girl,” she said as soon as she got in the car. “Hey Catrell,” she smiled.

“I don’t ‘member you,” he informed her haughtily and focused his attention out the window. I shook my head.

“Oh my goodness,” she said, observing the two other boys. “LaLa...”

“Girl, I know,” I agreed.

“They are so handsome, girl,” she commented. “Hi you guys!” They sat looking at her blankly.

“They don’t know you,” Catrell informed her.

“When did he get so mean?” she mumbled to me.

“I guess he lost his job and his wife left him or some shit,” I said sarcastically.

“Auntie LaLa,” he called.

“Yes, Catrell?”

“Can we go to Chubby Cheese?” he asked hopefully.

“You want to go to Chuck E. Cheese’s?” I clarified.

“Yes,” he said.

“They don’t serve drinks,” Simba whispered, making me laugh.

“Mali, Marshay, do you guys like Chuck E. Cheese’s?” I asked.

“What is that?” Mali asked. “We can eat cheese?” Catrell fell out laughing like he was at Def Comedy Jam.

“Catrell, cut it out,” I said. “Not every kid in the world has been to Chuck E. Cheese’s.” *And if it was left up to Tina,*

*you never would have been either.* “It’s a pizza place, Mali. There’s games you can play too.”

“Can we play?” he asked.

“Of course!” I said.

“And the mouse!” Catrell yelled excitedly. “A big mouse!” That was the only part of Chuck E. Cheese’s that I couldn’t stand. I didn’t want that rat anywhere near me. He gave me the creeps. Catrell had like fifty pics stuck in my phone, of him and the rat. Every now and then, he’d want me to break them out. I guess he wanted to ensure that I hadn’t deleted them behind his back.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**L**ittle Mali ate so much pizza that he probably wouldn't be hungry for a week. He then jumped up and followed Catrell and Simba to find the rat. Marshay opted to sit by my side and not participate in the antics of his brother and big cousin.

"Do you want some more pizza?" I asked. He shook his head.

"I'm going to play in the balls," Simba announced.

"Looks like you'll be saying that a lot in the near future by the way you came back to the car smiling," I joked. She fell out laughing.

"You are so nasty!" she said. She took off with Catrell and Mali and off they went.

"Do you want to go play?" I asked Marshay.

"No," he said quietly.

"Okay. I don't either. We can just sit here together, okay?" He nodded contentedly. We sat talking about nothing in particular; dogs, cats, foods and whatnot. He got particularly excited when I told him I couldn't wait for him to meet Beyonce'. I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the pictures until I found Beyonce'. I tapped the pic to enlarge it, and when I did, it flipped to the next picture in my phone.

"Daddy!" Marshay said excitedly. I held the phone tightly in my hand, and stared at the picture of my brother Zeph.

"Yep, there's your daddy," I said, putting on a fake smile. "Your daddy is my brother. Just like how Mali is your brother." I then went back to the pic of Beyonce' and he was in awe. He held my phone and checked out every inch of her as he oohed and awed.

"Can I see?" asked Catrell, appearing seemingly out of nowhere like a ghostly kid in a scary movie, and staring at me accusingly.

"Oh it's just a picture, Catrell," I smiled, hoping he would lose interest.

"Can I see?" he repeated.

"Sure," I said, handing him my phone. He looked down at the picture, then up at me and over at Marshay. He looked at me one last time, then handed back my phone. He left without another word. I knew I would hear about it later. I guess he just loved me enough to save me some embarrassment at that moment.

Catrell came right back with Simba and Little Mali following behind him. He didn't say anything, just stood next to the table with his backpack thrown over his shoulder, and looking at me with Marshay cuddled up next to my side.

"I guess it's time to go," Simba informed me, with a discrete head nod in Catrell's direction.

"Are you guys ready to go?" I asked the kids.

"I'm ready!" Catrell screamed like a crazed mini-serial killer. His little face was fixed into a scowl as if the world had done him wrong and he was out for revenge.

"Mali, did you have a good time?" I asked.

"Yeah. Time to leave?" he inquired sadly.

"We don't have to go yet if you aren't ready. Do you want to stay a little longer?" I asked. Catrell's head spun around like the girl on the Exorcist and he fixed his mean mug on Mali.

"Yeah!" Mali yelled in happiness, tugging on Simba's hand. He led her back to the balls as she laughed.

"We'll leave in a little while baby," I told Catrell. "You want to come sit by Auntie LaLa?" I asked.

"No!" he yelled, loud enough for people in another state to hear. He then burst into tears. "I want Granny!" He had never

said that before and I realized at that moment just how upset he was at having to share his auntie with these intrusive strangers.

I stood up from the table and picked him up in my arms. I sat down with him on my lap and started telling him about how much Marshay had enjoyed seeing the pictures of Beyonce'. I had gotten him to tell Marshay about Jay-Z as well, and then my phone rang, interrupting the conversation. I glanced at my caller ID. It was Hitta.

"Hi, Baby!" I said happily.

"Hey, Babe. I need you to come back to the shop. It's important. Not in a little while, LaLa. Now," he demanded.

"What's wrong?" I asked. He ended the call.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Simba!” I called from the edge of the ball pit. “Simba!” She finally looked in my direction. “We have to leave now. It’s important.” She gathered up Mali, put her shoes on, and we left the establishment.

“What’s wrong, LaLa?” she asked as we all walked out.

“I don’t know. Hitta called. He wouldn’t say it over the phone,” I informed her worriedly. “He just said we need to come back to the shop.”

We were almost to our destination when my phone rang again. “I’m on my way, Babe,” I said before he could start talking. “I’m almost there.”

“Okay,” he said. “LaLa, when you get here, Babe, ask Simba to stay in the car with the kids for a minute.”

“I will, Hitta,” she said. “No problem.”

“Alright, thanks,” he responded.

I double parked and jumped out of the car. I practically ran into the building.

“Hitta!” I called, walking to his office. He was sitting behind his desk, with his head resting in his hands. “What’s wrong, Baby?” I asked.

“You better sit down for this one, Babe.” He came around the desk where I sat in the chair. He leaned on the desk in front of me, and handed me a piece of paper. I looked at him in confusion. “Read it, Babe,” he said gently.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

I didn't want to read any letters. I wanted him to tell me what was going on; the short version. I wanted him to tell me that he had simply called me here because he missed me and wanted to see me. No such luck. He impatiently pointed to the letter, urging me to start reading.

*Dear LaLa,*

*I could see from a mile away the loyalty you have for your family. No one, and I mean no one, not even my own family has ever come and tried to do anything for me or my sons. I appreciate what you did today. Thank you.*

*LaLa, you may not understand the decision I've made, but I hope and believe that one day you will. You have a beautiful and forgiving heart, and that is why I know without a doubt that you will take care of my boys as if they were your own. I am leaving. I feel that I too, deserve a life and a chance at happiness. I have met a man who loves me more than words can ever express, but he doesn't want children. Please don't think that's my reason for leaving my kids with you. That is only a fraction of the reason. I'm tired of struggling, tired of having no life, tired of it all. I am now twenty years old. Yes, I had my oldest son when I was barely seventeen years old. I can imagine what you must be thinking about your brothers at this point, but the truth is LaLa... (please don't be too angry with me), I lied and told Mali that I was twenty. I have always looked older than my age, and he believed me. I didn't lie to deceive him, I just wanted someone to love me. That is why I left LA. It was your brother Zeph who told Mali my real age.*

*See Lala, Zeph used to kick it with my older sister Tamiko. They've been off and on for a few years, (Yes the Tamiko who was involved in the case you just beat). When Mali found out my real age, he was really mad. My sister told my mom and my mom sent me to live with my aunt in Atlanta. I had Little Mali seven months later. I guess you're now wondering how I ended up with Zeph. Well, I came back to LA for two weeks to see my mom and so she could see the baby. I saw Zeph there with my sister, and we talked for a minute. He told me to call him the next day and I did. We ended up going to a motel together. No, I'm not proud of it, but what's done is done and*

*like you said, there is no point dwelling on it. You probably think I am really weak for leaving my children, but the truth is, I can't take care of them, LaLa. I refuse to get public assistance and I have no one to help me. They have no father, no family, not anyone. I know you and Hitta will take good care of them, and you can give them the life they both so deserve.*

*To break it down and keep it one hundred, LaLa, I just don't want to be a mom. I'm not ready. Maybe one day when I get myself together, I will come back for them. Until then, please take care of them as you do Catrell. He is a beautiful and happy little boy and I know my boys will be the same. Take care, and please don't judge me too harshly. I am only human.*

*Sincerely, Tanazha.*

"This dirty fucking bitch," I said, and cried with my head damn near in my lap. I couldn't believe this tramp had abandoned her children. What the hell were Hitta and I supposed to do with not one, but three children?

"I'm so sorry, Babe," Hitta said, pulling me into his arms. This was just too much. I had just met these kids. I had every intention of being a bomb-ass aunt to them, but I had no idea that a simple trip to Chuck E. Cheese's would bring me to being their surrogate mother.

"I have her sister's address, Babe. I need to see if she's there!" I said, whipping out my phone.

"I'll take you. See if Simba can take the kids to her house for now, Babe. We'll be there in a little bit. But just in case this bitch is at her sister's house, her kids don't need to hear all that," Hitta said. I could tell he was just as pissed off as I was. The only time I had ever seen that look on his face was when my brother, Hitta's best friend, was killed.

We walked outside and I motioned for Simba to get out of the car. She stood next to the car and waited for me to approach. Hitta went to his SUV and waited inside.

"Simba, I need a huge favor. Can you take all the kids to your house and we'll come get them in a little bit?" I asked desperately.

"Of course," she answered, and waited for me to give her the key.

"I'll call you later and tell you everything, okay? I just don't have time right now," I said.

"Don't worry about it," she said over her shoulder as she walked around to the driver's seat. Hitta pulled up next to us and I got in his vehicle.

"What's the address, LaLa?" he asked. I looked over at him; his jaw was tight, his face set, and his eyes fixed straight ahead. He was furious. I ran the address off to him. He hiked up the volume of the music to 'eardrum killer' and focused on the South Central streets as *Young Note* blasted through the speakers. I reached over and touched his arm. He looked at me and focused his attention back on the street. A few minutes later, he reached over and picked up my hand.

I turned down the music and looked over at my fiancé.

"Are you alright, Hitta?"

"Fuck no. I don't like this shit at all. I know it will probably sound crazy, Babe, but I would feel better if she had written the letter to me. How the fuck a bitch gon' try to take your kindness for weakness like that though? You welcomed her kids into your family, LaLa, and never even second-guessed the bitch. Fuck that shit. When I find this bitch, Babe..."

"Hitta, I understand, Baby. But this is bigger than a bitch just running off and leaving. You read the letter, and you spent more time talking to her than I did. Look at the big picture; there is something much deeper than just wanting to be able to club on the weekends. Baby, this woman can't take care of these kids. Now don't get me wrong, they were clean and all, but did you see Little Mali's shoes? Baby his shoes were like two sizes too big, which tells me that someone probably gave them to her. Marshay's shirt had a picture on the front of a baby tiger with a pacifier in its mouth. It was too small, and he's probably had it since he was nine months old."

"LaLa, you read that shit! She said she found a man but he doesn't want kids! That's a selfish ass bitch! She should have said fuck that fool and kept being a mother to her kids!" he raged.

"I understand what you're saying, Hitta. I agree with you completely. But I think that some of that is just a front. Who

in the hell would take their two children to live with two other adults and three other children if they had a choice?" I asked.

"Babe, she had to have spent a good four hundred on that weave," he pointed out. "Not to mention the Michael Kors shoes, the bag, and the nails and toes done. So her kids look like shit so she can pretend to be fly?" he asked angrily.

"You have a point, Baby. But if you would have really been paying attention, that bag didn't say Michael Kors. It said Miguel Kors. Hitta, she's having a really hard time. I'm not justifying what she did, I'm as mad as you are. But I would rather her kids be with me than not getting what they need. These are my brothers' children, Hitta. Something isn't right about this chick. The shit with Tina is bad enough. But if I can help these kids too, then why not? They're as much my family as Catrell is," I pointed out.

"So what are you saying, Babe? You *want* to keep them?" he asked.

"Hitta, if she's not at this house when we get there, we're going to take these boys home with us and give them the home they need. If she is there, she needs to come with something better than some bullshit about a man who doesn't want any kids. That's not good enough for me," I said. "But we're not going to make a big scene, or demand that she take her children. If she doesn't want them, I will definitely take them. I know this is a lot to swallow all at once, Hitta, and if you don't want any part of it, I totally understand. But I'm not turning away my family for anyone, Baby. I can't. Not even for you."

He glanced over and looked at me as if he must be hearing wrong. I was staring dead in his face to let him know I meant business.

"So you're really gon' get at me like that?" he asked. "Like Mali wasn't my fucking family? Like I'm not about to be your fucking husband and wouldn't fucking be by your side no matter what happened? Seriously, LaLa?"

"I know, Hitta. I'm sorry," I said. We were silent for a few moments.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

“I know you’re frustrated, Babe, but we’re not going to let this cause problems between us. It’s going to be hard but we can do it. I got you, okay, Babe?” he said. I nodded, knowing if I attempted to open my mouth, the scream that I felt building in my throat would surely erupt.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Hi, my name is LaLa. I’m looking for Tanazha,” I said, when a pretty woman came and answered the door.

“I’m sorry, you have wrong address,” a short Hispanic woman informed me with broken English and a smile. “No one by that name no live here.” I stood in utter shock and disappointment, then dared a look back at Hitta as he sat in his SUV. I shook my head.

“Sorry to bother you,” I said with tears choking my voice. I walked away as she closed the door. “Let’s go get the kids, and go home,” I said to Hitta. “She doesn’t live here. She gave us a fake address.

“Okay, Babe,” he said, rubbing the back of my head. I directed him to Simba’s house where we spotted my Charger sitting in the driveway. I walked up to the door and knocked. She immediately answered.

“LaLa, you okay, Girl? Have you been crying?” she asked in concern.

“I’ll call you, Simba. I’m just so exhausted. I don’t know how much more I can take,” I confessed.

“Let me get them for you,” she said, holding the door open for me. When I stepped in, Marshay immediately ran into my arms. I picked him up and held him. Catrell and Little Mali came shortly after.

"Auntie LaLa, Simba has a pet ball!" Catrell said excitedly. "Almost like Uncle Mali's!"

"It's a Pit Bull, Baby. You weren't scared?" I asked.

"No! He's nice."

"Good, Catrell. You ready to go home?" I asked, observing him staring at Marshay in my arms.

"Is he going?" he asked with a perplexed look on his face. I just couldn't with him at that moment. I felt as if I was a pot about to boil over.

"Yes, Catrell, he is going. And so is Little Mali. Do you want to share your room with them?" I inquired. "Maybe we can put a set of bunk-beds in your room! You know how much you love bunk-beds!"

"Not no more," he said simply. "Only Beyonce' and Jay-Z in my room!"

"Okay. Well that's your room and if you don't want anyone in there, that's fine," I said. "I guess Hitta and I will just have to go to their room and tell them bed-time stories and tuck them in. We surely don't want to bother you. Beyonce' and Jay-Z will just have to decide which room they want to visit every night."

"No! Okay, Bunk beds, Auntie LaLa," he exclaimed, not being able to stand the thought of everyone including dog and cat visiting someone else's room without his knowledge of what was taking place.

"Okay, Catrell," I agreed, making him think it was his call. I set Marshay down on his feet, and looked into Catrell's beautiful eyes as he stared up at me questioningly. I then picked him up in my arms and squeezed him tightly. "I love you so much," I said. "You mean everything to me."

"Even more than Hitta? And Beyonce' and Jay-Z?" he asked incredulously. *Here the hell we go*, I thought to myself.

"More than all of them," I assured him.

"And these kids?" he demanded.

"More than anyone," I said quietly. He threw his little arms around me and hugged me tightly.

Hitta and I got all the kids safely home. Marshay was asleep by the time we pulled up in the driveway. Hitta carried him into the house.

"Are they going to eat my tacos?" Catrell asked. "And what about my toys, Auntie LaLa? And I'm the one who sits by Hitta at the table. No going in your office," he reminded me, because he wasn't allowed in there. I rolled my eyes. If this boy told me one more rule, I would run away and never return. "I feed Beyonce' and Jay-Z!" he yelled like he was a criminal making demands to the police. I looked down at him as if he were possessed. He stormed into the house and waited at the bottom of the stairs to see from which room Hitta would come from.

"Is he in my bed?" Catrell asked innocently.

"Nah, Bruh," Hitta answered. "He's in the guest room. Your room isn't ready yet. Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe," Catrell agreed.

"They'll sleep in the other room tonight, and we'll move them to your room tomorrow," I said.

"Okay, Auntie LaLa," he agreed in his sweetest voice. "My right here feels bad," he informed me, rubbing his stomach.

"Too much pizza, Baby?" I asked, squatting down to his level. He nodded.

"Can I have a taco?"

"No! You just said your stomach was hurting, Catrell," I reminded him.

"Yeah," he said, putting the same pained look on his face.

"What's wrong with my'dude?" Hitta asked.

"Nothing," Catrell said quickly. I looked at him strangely.

"Babe," I said to Hitta, when Catrell went to show Mali his room. "I'll be back shortly. I have to go get some things for the boys. They need pajamas, underwear, everything."

"You want me to go?" he asked.

"No. I'll go. Do you need anything?"

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

“Nah, Babe, I’m good,” he said. “I love you. Man, I couldn’t have asked for a better woman. You’re everything to me. I’m not sure what I would do if I ever lost you, LaLa.”

“You’ll never have to find out, Hitta,” I smiled. “I’ll be right back.”

“Take my truck, Babe. Here’s the keys,” he said, placing the keys in my hand. “I don’t know what all you plan on buying, but I know you. You’ll need all the room you can get. And here, LaLa. Take this.” I looked down at his hand. He was holding out six one hundred dollar bills.

“Ha ha,” I said. “That’s very funny. And no thanks, Baby. I got this.” I accepted the keys.

“LaLa, I’m not really in the mood for no bullshit. Just take the money and go get what they need. Yes, I know you can do it yourself and all that good independent woman type shit. But I live here now too, and we’re a team. If we’re not a team, then you need to say that shit now so I can move back to LA.”

“Always will be,” I said and kissed him. I accepted the money he offered and walked out the door.

I drove to the Montclair Mall where I bought jeans, shirts, tennis shoes, boots, jackets, t-shirts and shorts. From there I went to Target. I bought underwear, socks, and a few pairs of pajamas for both boys and a few things for Catrell as well. I had been almost three hours. It was time to take my tired ass home. I was almost to my house when I remembered something that I had completely forgotten.

I made it home and carried as much as I could into the house. Hitta went out and got the rest. I set all the bags in the guest room, and went down the hall to the guest room. I started my laptop and summonsed Google. I needed a bunk bed and as soon as possible. Actually, Catrell’s room was large enough to hold three twin sized beds, but that was a bit much. I found a bunk bed that had a top bed, a bottom bed, and one attached to the side. It had a giant bookshelf on the other end, and a large space for toys. Perfect. I submitted my credit card number and asked for next day delivery. I was willing to pay the extra fifty dollars to make sure the kids were comfortable. I then ordered three dressers. The only thing left to do, would be to get Catrell

to part with his beloved race car bed. I turned off my laptop and went back downstairs.

"You got them to bed? Thanks, Babe," I smiled.

"LaLa, we're going to have a small problem with Catrell. He's so jealous it's making him sick."

"I know, baby, but he has to get used to the idea. It would be no different than if you and I were going to have a baby. He would have to get used to the idea of another baby around. He really likes the boys, but he doesn't like having to share us with them," I pointed out. "He'll be okay. We just have to give him time to adjust," I said, feeling way more confident than I felt.

"All I'm saying, Babe, is keep an eye on him. He's cool with Little Mali. It seems to be Marshay that he has the biggest issue with," Hitta advised me. I thought back to earlier in the day when Catrell had walked up on me sitting with Marshay at Chuck E. Cheese's.

"You're right, Hitta. It's going to be hard," I agreed. "I'm calling the lawyer tomorrow so he can draw up the papers for Catrell. I'm going to talk to him about the boys too."

"Good idea, Babe. Did you keep the letter she wrote you?" he asked.

"Hell yes! We're covered, Babe. Just in case she tries to say we took them or something. But if I have anything to say about it, she's not getting them back unless a judge says so. It would have been different if she would have talked to us and asked us to care for them for a while. Then we could have kept them until she got back on her feet, but she didn't even give us an option. She doesn't know who the hell we are. She didn't know if I would sell them on Amazon or what. So if it wasn't us she left them with, it would have been somebody else," I reasoned. "But what I really want to know is, why she made up that whole story about her sister and all that. If she lied about that, then what else did she lie about?"

"I thought about that too. I mean, it's obvious who the fathers are, but did the shit really happen the way she said?" he stated, speaking out loud what I was thinking in my head. We

looked up at the same time to find Marshay easing his way down the stairs, one at a time.

"Hi, Baby," I said, and got up to carry him down the rest of the way. "You couldn't sleep?" He shook his head then laid it on my shoulder. I sat down with him on my lap. He looked curiously at Hitta.

"What's up, Lil Man?" Hitta asked, picking up the baby's hand and doing some secret handshake. Marshay smiled. "It's hard to sleep in a new place huh?" Marshay gave Hitta his full attention as he spoke. "You'll get used to it."

Marshay fell asleep on my lap and I carried him back up the stairs and put him back in the bed with his brother. Little Mali looked up at me with huge brown eyes. He looked as if he had been awake for a while.

"Hi, Mali. You okay?" I whispered. He nodded. "Do you want to come talk to me for a while?" Again, he nodded. He got up from the bed, careful not to wake his brother. I carried him down the stairs and sat him on the couch between Hitta and me.

"Where is my mom?" he asked quietly.

"You're going to be staying with us for a while, Mali. I don't know for how long, but we're happy that you're here," I said in mock excitement.

"Oooo!" he exclaimed happily as Jay-Z came and sat staring at all of us accusingly. I was wondering if Catrell had sent him to see what was going on. He came a little closer and Mali got down on the floor and held his hand out. Jay-Z sat watching him cautiously wondering who the hell he was, where he came from, and what exactly his intentions were. After a few minutes of checking each other out, Jay-Z decided the human boy was cool enough, and began rubbing his head against Mali's hand.

When it was obvious that Mali was fighting with all his might to keep his eyes open so that he could stay with Jay-Z, Hitta picked him up and took him upstairs. Mali seemed to have forgotten for the moment that he was in a new place, with a new life, around new people.

Hitta and I lay in bed later that night, staring at each other and wondering what the future would bring.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yes, Baby. I’m fine. Just a little scared I guess. It’s intimidating to say the least. I woke up this morning raising one nephew, and now I have three to raise. That girl isn’t coming back for them, Hitta. Any real mother would have been missing her kids like crazy by now and would have at least tried to call. Then I’m kind of worried about Catrell. This isn’t easy for him either. He’s so used to having us all to himself. Now he has to share us with two other people. I’m going to do the best I can, Baby, but that’s all I can do. I don’t want to fail my nephews. All of them have been through so much.”

“I know, Babe. But all you can do is be the best aunt you can be. We’ll just take the shit one day at a time okay?”

“Okay, Baby,” I agreed.

Hitta fell asleep long before I did, and I lay watching him sleep. I said a prayer to the Lord to please give me the guidance I needed and the strength and knowledge to raise these kids into the men He wanted them to be. I lay in the dark, silently talking to Granny and Mali. I even spoke briefly to Zeph. I asked him to look up from hell and see all the damage and destruction that he had caused here on earth before he blessed us all with his demise.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Babe, did you even go to sleep last night?” Hitta asked, coming into the kitchen as I made breakfast.

“Not really. Where are the boys?”

“Everybody is lined up at the sink, brushing their teeth,” he replied.

“Hitta, I just thought of something. I didn’t even think to check if Marshay would need to sleep in a diaper last night,” I said. “I wish the bitch would have left some kind of information about her kids,” I said quietly. “I know he’s potty-trained because he didn’t have a diaper on yesterday.”

“And she took him to the bathroom yesterday in the shop, Babe,” Hitta informed me. “Just stay right here,” he said, heading out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“To check the bed,” he said, clearly proud of himself for coming up with the idea. He went up the stairs, then came back a short time later. “He’s cool, Babe. He is almost three years old so I’m sure she started a little early. Hell, my mama gets ‘em as soon as they start walking and talking,” he laughed.

“Granny potty-trained Catrell before he was three,” I said proudly. By the time he hit that third birthday, he was letting whoever was listening know that he had to go pee,” I laughed. “He didn’t care if they were in church, he was going to say it loud and clear so there would be no mistake!”

"I'm going to get them," Hitta said.

"Their beds will be here today, Baby, but I also need to get one of those little gates that closes off the stairs. I don't want any accidents," I informed him.

"Auntie LaLa!" Catrell said, coming into the kitchen with the other two boys behind him.

"Hi guys!" I said. "Are you guys hungry?"

"Yes," Mali answered. Marshay walked over to Hitta and raised his arms to be picked up. Hitta lifted him high into the air, then went and sat him on a chair. I glanced over at Catrell. He was utterly appalled by the entire scene.

"Catrell, what do you have planned today?" I asked, trying to divert his attention. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

"Can I play in the backyard?" he asked.

"Sure. We can do that," I agreed with a smile.

"I said *me*. Oh, and Mali can come," he added. "And Hitta." I guess he was making it clear that Marshay and I were not invited.

"Oh, okay. Well sure. If Hitta will go with you, then that's fine," I smiled. "You have fun. Ready to eat?" Instead of answering, he stormed to his chair and climbed up. He rested his arms on the table and stared at me as I put food on the plates.

I carried three plates to the table. They each had a scrambled egg, a sausage, grits, and a half piece of toast. I then put Hitta's plate in front of him. It had four over-easy eggs, hash browns, grits, six maple sausages, and two pieces of toast. Catrell eyed me suspiciously as he picked at his food.

I didn't even want to eat. I had no appetite. I sat down at the table with a glass of orange juice.

"You're not eating?" Hitta asked. I shook my head no.

"Auntie LaLa," Mali called. I thought Catrell was about to pass out as I heard his fork hit his plate with a loud clang.

"Um...yes, Baby?" I answered, trying to avoid Catrell's piercing eyes.

"Can I have more?" Little Mali asked shyly.

"Of course!" I said, and got up and put more food on his plate.

"Me too!" yelled Catrell who wasn't even half way finished.

"Eat what's on your plate first, Catrell. Then you can have some more okay?" I said.

"I need more!" he yelled, drawing looks from all of us.

"Eat what you have first," I said.

He proceeded to eat his food and was barely able to finish. He made it happen though. When everybody was done, I cleaned up the kitchen and called Simba as Hitta kept the three boys entertained.

"Hey Boo, what's going on? Everything okay?" I told her about the letter, the kids, the bitch, and the abandonment. "LaLa, you're lying!" she said in disbelief. "That was some dirty-ass shit! What are you going to do?" she asked.

"The only thing there is to do, Simba. Take care of my nephews," I said simply. "We now have a full house."

"Wow...girl that's some old bullshit. How could she leave her kids like that?"

"I don't know. But it doesn't seem like it was too hard for her to do," I surmised. "We haven't heard a word from her. We don't know if they have a favorite story, a favorite food, medication, anything. But the more I think about it, she probably doesn't know those things either."

"Right," she agreed. "Damn. Well if you ever need me to babysit or anything just give me a call. I'd be glad to help you."

"I appreciate that, Simba. Have you talked to your new friend yet?" I asked.

"Girl yes, last night for like an hour! He is so funny!" she said. "I have to call him today."

"That's cool, Simba," I smiled.

"What are you guys going to do today?" she asked. "I'm going to have my niece and two nephews today if you get a chance to stop by."

"The beds and dressers are coming so I need to stay around the house. If Hitta had anything planned to do, he probably won't be doing it. I think he's afraid to leave me right now," I laughed.

"Are they good kids?"

"They really are. So far. It's Catrell that's giving me the blues. Girl, he is not cool with any of this at all, and he is letting it be known," I said.

"He is too much," she laughed.

"Okay, girl, let me get off this phone and see what's going on around here. It's too quiet," I said. We ended the call and I walked up the stairs. I stuck my head in Catrell's room. The three boys were all standing around in awe as Hitta disassembled Catrell's bed. Catrell looked at me helplessly.

"You're getting a new bed today, Baby!" I exclaimed in mock excitement. "A big boy's bed! A *bunk* bed!"

"I'm getting a bump bed!" he yelled happily to no one in particular as he ran out of the room. I guess he was on his way to tell the dog and cat. "I'm getting a bump bed!" he repeated, running back into the room. "Two beds?" he asked.

"Three," I informed him.

"Three?" he asked.

"Yes, three. There are three of you," I reminded him.

"He needs a baby bed," he said in disgust, pointing at Marshay. "He can have my race car bed.

"No, we're going to get rid of the race car bed, Catrell," Hitta said. "You and Mali are big enough to sleep on the top without falling out. But wait until you see it, my'dude."

"You saw it?" Catrell asked Hitta suspiciously.

"I saw a pic of it," Hitta said.

"Show me the pic!" Catrell said angrily, as if he were an officer demanding that Hitta show his license and registration. We were saved by the sound of the doorbell ringing and I went to answer it.

"Your beds are here!" I said. Catrell and Mali immediately starting jumping up and down.

"Tell them we don't need them to assemble it, Babe. I'd feel better doing it myself. Then I know it's done right," Hitta said.

"Okay, Baby," I agreed and went to answer the door.

I signed, tipped, and thanked them for their services. Hitta came down, bringing the parts from Catrell's old bed. The

men took the parts away, and together we carried the boxes up the stairs.

"Babe, maybe you could take them somewhere," Hitta suggested when he found the six pairs of eyes staring him down. I wanted to laugh. "Go on and laugh," he said, looking like he wanted to laugh himself. "I know you want to!"

"Not at all, Baby," I reassured him. "Come on, guys. Let's go find something to do."

"Can we find my mom?" Mali asked hopefully. Hitta and I exchanged a look.

I absolutely refused to disclose to this little boy that the address and phone number that his mother had given us were as fake as a twenty-two-dollar bill. Address was fake, phone number was fake, and mama was fake as fuck.

"Mali, remember last night when we talked," I began.

"When?" Catrell demanded to know. I looked at him and fixed my attention back on little Mali.

"I told you that you would be staying with us for a while," I reminded him. He nodded.

"*When was the talk?*" Catrell screamed like a madman.

"Ay," Hitta said sternly. "I'm gon' need you to tone that down, Bruh. That's my girl you're talking to," Hitta said. "Be nice to her."

"She's my Aunt LaLa!" Catrell informed Hitta.

"Then treat her like she's your Aunt LaLa," Hitta replied, giving Catrell a serious look to let him know he meant business. "You don't yell at grown people period, but especially her."

"Okay," Catrell said quietly. I was stunned. If that were me talking to Catrell, the conversation would have dragged on for another ten minutes. I was clearly impressed. Catrell gave me the side-eye trying to see if I was amused by the exchange.

"Let's go you guys. By the time we get back, you will all three have new beds and dressers!" I said.

They cheered loudly for team Hitta and followed me out the door. I called Simba.

"We're on our way," I laughed.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

“Good! Girl, this little boy done told me to shut my mouth! Bet he don’t tell nobody else that in his whole life!” she said.

“How old is he?” I asked in amazement.

“Girl, he’s five. His brother just turned seven, and his sister is four. Please hurry up and get here before I end up being Coby’s roommate!” she said dramatically. “This little boy better act like he knows how hood I am! This ain’t his first time meeting me!” I was hollering laughing.

“I’ll see you in a little bit, Boo. Stay strong!”

“I’ll try. I ain’t making no promises!” she informed me.

“LaLa!” Hitta called from the top of the stairs.

“Yeah, Baby?”

“Here, get the keys.”

“I can take my car,” I informed him.

“Take mine,” he said with finality. “I’ll feel better,” he smiled.

“Okay,” I agreed without further argument.

“I want to take Auntie LaLa’s car,” Catrell said.

“Alright, then. You follow in her car,” Hitta said, causing Catrell to laugh. “But she’s taking mine.

“I can’t drive!” Catrell informed him through uncontrollable laughter.

“Oh. Well then it looks like you’re going to have to ride with her then,” Hitta said. “Unless maybe you can get Jay-Z to drive you, but he’s been in a bad mood all morning.” Catrell couldn’t even answer. There’s a certain laugh that comes from children that you may only hear a few times before the age of eighteen. It’s that laugh that comes from the belly, when they can’t catch their breath and no sound escapes their mouths. Catrell was laughing so hard that the rest of us started laughing too. He tried to speak but no words would come.

When he finally returned to normal, we walked out to Hitta’s Benz SUV. I didn’t want to tell Hitta but I hated his SUV. It was a G-class Benz SUV and it looked like I was driving a toaster. I got everybody inside, after transferring all the child seats from my car, and we headed to the City of Angels.

"Catrell, can you share your iPad with Mali and Marshay so they can see what you're watching?" I asked, keeping my eyes on the freeway. "Show them how to play the bear game," I suggested.

"I am," he confirmed.

"Thanks, Baby." I would get them both one as soon as I could. I was well aware that Hitta's vehicle had TVs on the back of both front seats, but knowing him I would probably turn it on and some porn would show. I would have to remember to ask him.

"Hey Boys!" Simba greeted as she let us all into her house.

"Say hi," I said. Catrell and Mali spoke, Marshay looked at her as if she was half crazy.

"Girl, what took you so long?" she asked. "These kids got me about to lose the last little teaspoon of mind I got left. "Kyle," she said to her oldest nephew, "take the kids to play. We'll all go outside in a minute.

"We made it in less than an hour!" I informed her.

"Where's your car? You driving Hitta's shit?" she asked admirably.

"Yeah," I said.

"Bitch, that shit is fly! Why are you looking like you're about to cry?" she asked.

"I like my car," I said simply.

"Coby called a little while ago," she smiled. "Said to tell you hi and she misses you. She said she's going to end up beating Bria's ass though. I told her to try to stay out of trouble, but Coby feels like Bria is fucking with her on purpose."

"That tramp ain't even worth it," I said, with a roll of my eyes.

"You look cute!" Simba said, taking into observation the black denim shorts I wore with the pink and black J's and matching tank top.

"Thanks, Simba," I replied, taking a seat at the counter that separated the kitchen from her living room.

"So the ho still ain't called?" she asked quietly. I shook my head.

"Are they asking for her?"

"Yep."

"That's so cold. God will take care of her pitiful ass," she reassured me. "Don't even trip. You'll get your blessings regardless, LaLa."

"I know, Girl, and I'm trying not to be mad but I can't help it," I admitted.

"Hell, you have every right to be mad, LaLa. Some random bitch comes and deserts her kids with you and your man...she don't know what the hell you might have had planned to do. What if you were about to fly out of the country or something?" she asked. "And she don't know Hitta like that. You don't just leave your kids with no man you don't know. Fuck her," Simba stated angrily. "Do you want to take all the kids to the park?" she asked. "Or we can just go in the backyard."

"It doesn't matter to me. Whatever you want to do," I said with a wave of my hand.

"Let's go to the park. They can play on the swings and shit. I have to do something with my sister's kids where they will wear themselves out, girl. If I don't, they will tear my little castle apart! Especially the little girl. She is something else, LaLa. She's the worst one," she stated in exasperation.

We gathered all the kids together and walked to the park which was only around the corner really. It wasn't even a block away from Simba's house.

"Auntie LaLa," Catrell called as the other kids ran toward the swings and slides.

"What's wrong, Baby?"

"What's a titty?" he asked innocently. Simba began choking, and my eyes widened in surprise and shock.

"Well Catrell, that's a really bad word. Why do you ask?"

"The girl called me that," he said.

"You are definitely *not* that so don't worry okay? Just ignore it." He looked at me and nodded. "Do you want to go play now?"

"Yes!" he answered and headed toward the other kids.

Simba and I kept a close eye on them and sat only a few feet away. We were talking and watching the kids play when we were approached by three girls. They couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen years old.

"Those J's is the shit," one of them smiled.

"Thanks," I said, and returned to my conversation with Simba.

The girl came and stood on the side of me, and placed one bright red converse on the table next to me. I looked up at her and kept talking.

"Yeah, those is real cute," she observed. "Look like they're just my size too." I glanced over at Simba and discreetly removed my earrings. My heart started racing and my hands automatically formed into fists. I wasn't looking for a fight, but I'd be damned if I let anybody take anything from me. I smiled at her. I was already in violation for even allowing her ass to stand so close to me while I was sitting down, but I didn't want to make a scene in front of the kids. Simba looked at me and we silently decided that if it came down to it, it was win lose or draw; and I didn't plan on doing any losing.

"Go on and run those," the girl said, smiling at her friends who weren't saying anything just watching the scene unfold. At that moment, Catrell ran over to me.

"Auntie LaLa, did you see me go down the slide so fast?" he asked excitedly.

"I did!" I lied. I hadn't seen shit. I was too busy keeping my eyes on this shady ho.

"LaLa," Simba called, then jerked her head in the direction of another female and three dudes approaching. They were older than the ones who had approached up, but clad in red. *Fuck*, I thought to myself. This is not going to end well.

"What's up, Lil Man," the girl that wanted my J's said to Catrell. "I'm digging them li'l kicks." She smiled, observing his black and yellow retro Jordan's. He looked at her as if she was one can short of a six pack. He had no idea what she was saying. I turned to look at her, then focused my attention back on Catrell.

"Go back and play with the kids Catrell," I said sternly. He turned to go back to the playground.

"Hold up, Li'l Man. Them muthafuckas will be fly as fuck on my little brother," she said to her friends and laughed. Her friends didn't crack a smile, just looked at each other and shook their heads.

"You can run me both of them," she ordered with a sneer on her face that I assume was meant to intimidate me. "Go on and take them off Li'l Man!"

"Catrell, do what I said! Go play!" I demanded. I was livid. He took off running back to the other kids.

"Bitch, you must be half crazy and fifty percent retarded with your basic ass! You ain't taking a muthafuckin' thing from my nephew!" I said.

I know it was her intention to swing and actually connect, but before she could even reach back completely I was on her like a starving pit bull on a raw steak. One of her home girls jumped off the table and attempted a rescue.

"If I was you, I'd have two seats," Simba advised her. "One for you, and one for your stupid ass home girl! This gon' be a fair one!" The girl stood helplessly as her home girl begged for her to get me off her. The older crowd that had assembled just stood laughing.

"I ought to stomp your stupid ass with these J's, Bitch, since you wanted 'em so bad!" I said to her as I continued to unleash the pent up frustration from the bullshit that was taking place in my life. "And you gon' try to jack my baby? My baby? Nobody fucks with my family!" I informed her and gave her one last good one to the eye. I wanted her to remember me each and every time she looked in the mirror.

"LaLa, come on! Let's go before the cops show up or some shit," she warned. It took me a few moments to register what she said, but I got off the girl and smoothed down my hair.

"You still want these J's, Little Bitch?" I asked. "The next time you want to show off for your friends, don't pick a little kid to rob," I advised. "You never know who you might be fuckin' with." She got up off the ground, dusting off her

clothes. I glanced at Simba who looked like she wanted to laugh.

“Girl, Mali and Zeph would have a fuckin’ fit if they knew you was out here fighting like this! But damn they’d be proud!” Simba said. “Kids! Let’s go,” she yelled, jolting them back to reality as they stood there staring at us.

“Mali and Zeph? Them is the homies,” one of the dudes said. “They RIP now though.”

“We know that!” Simba snapped. “Those are her big brothers.” The group exchanged a look as the beat up one stood dabbing her lip with her red bandana. She had one hand over her eye.

“So you’re Hitta’s girl?” the same dude asked. “You don’t remember me from Mali and Zeph’s spot? The home girl Meeshie brought you over there one day and we was all on the porch?” he reminded me.

“Yeah, I do remember you. And yeah, I’m Hitta’s girl,” I stated, trying to keep from smiling. I loved even the mention of my man.

“Ay, is that y’all nephew? The one Mali used to have all the time?” he asked in awe. “Damn, he done got big!”

“That’s him,” I said, and didn’t try to stop the smile that spread over my face.

“Sorry about the homies and y’all’s granny, rest in peace,” he said. “That was some cold shit. I nodded, but was unable to speak.

“Catrell, what are you doing?” Simba practically yelled. “Put your shoes back on!” I turned around to look at Catrell, who was standing in front of the girl I had beat up. He was standing in his socks, and holding out his shoes to her. He didn’t look afraid, or seem to feel threatened in any way. He had the same look he always had when he and I would give change to the homeless people outside the stores.

“We help people!” he announced to all those in earshot.

“Put your shoes back on, Bruh,” the dude I had been talking to said to Catrell. “It’s cool that you want to help somebody out, but you only help people who deserve your help. You understand?” Catrell nodded and wiggled his feet back into

his shoes. Granny and I had stressed so hard upon him to share with those in need that he didn't know the difference in someone in need who actually needed help, and someone trying to punk him for his goods.

"Come on, Baby," I said as he came and stood next to me. "Ready to go?" He nodded, clearly irritable that we had blocked one of his promised blessings that he was about to receive for helping a person in need. "We'll talk about it later okay?" Again, he nodded.

"Ay, take care, LaLa," the dude said. "It was good seeing you. Tell the homie Hitta that Lil G-Ride said what's up!"

"I will," I promised.

"You're a dumb ass bitch!" I heard him say to the girl as we all walked away. "You tried to jack a little kid? And one of the homie's fam at that?"

We continued walking out of the park as Catrell's actions played over and over in my head. He didn't want to share with Little Mali and Marshay because he saw them as a threat. He would rather share his belongings with a perfect stranger who he knew was not trying to get in on the love from his Aunt and soon-to-be uncle. I was proud of Catrell, and I would tell him so later.

"LaLa!" Simba called, and did a discreet nod back toward the area we were sitting in. The girl I had fought was trying desperately to defend herself as she was jumped by the three females who were present. The dudes stood there watching; the one I had been talking to a few minutes before, giving clear instructions to how he wanted the ass whooping to play out.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“What the fuck do you mean you had a fight with a bitch in the park?” Hitta stormed as I stood in the middle of my room explaining what had taken place.

“She tried to take me and Catrell’s shoes!”

“What? The bitch tried to rob y’all?” he asked. I nodded and continued with my story. He interrupted me sixty times in a thirty second period but I finally managed to tell him the whole story.

“Little G-Ride,” he repeated and smiled. “Good, I’m glad he had them beat that ho’s ass. That’s what she gets!” he roared, causing the muscles in his chest, shoulders, and neck to come to life. He was so much like Mali. “So let me guess...” he surmised. “You feel bad about beating her up, right?”

“Not at all,” I said simply. “I just want you to hear it from me before you hear it from anybody else.”

“You got her good, Babe?” he smiled.

“Like a boss!” I exclaimed, and we high-fived. “You know I’m giving no fucks when it comes to my baby! But get this...” I said, and told him about Catrell trying to give the girl his shoes.

“Damn, Babe,” he said, shaking his head. “He needs to know the difference.”

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"I know. He felt sorry for her, Hitta. Especially seeing her standing there all beat up. In his mind, she got a whoopin' for begging for his shoes when she really needed them. He's just a baby. What's really bothering me though is that he saw me fighting. I tried to explain to him on the way home that I was just trying to protect him. He says he understands, but I don't know," I said.

"Okay, but even still, Babe, you're not going to always be able to shelter him from these streets. I know it was a bad situation, but it was an experience he'll never forget. Everybody ain't gon' always think he's so innocent, nice, and cute. They're going to see him as a target. You won't be able to protect him all the time," he informed me gently.

"Well, I hope whoever decides to make him a target is prepared for his crazy-ass Auntie 'cause I'm not playing any games. It's whatever when it comes to my family, Hitta," I said without apology. "So may the best man win."

"But you're okay though?" he asked.

"Oh hell yeah. I don't have even a scratch on me, Baby. I think she probably even hit herself a few times, making the job easier for me!" I joked, causing him to crack up laughing.

"Are you ready to talk to Catrell, Babe?" he asked.

"He's in his room inspecting his new 'bump beds' right now. I'll let him calm down some first then talk to him later," I said.

"Okay," he agreed.

I undressed and got in the shower, then redressed and went to find Hitta.

"Can you watch them for a little while, Baby?"

"Yeah, you know that. Where you going LaLa? I know you ain't going to hunt down this bitch," he said.

"No," I laughed. "Nothing like that. But I'll be back in a little bit." I kissed him and grabbed my bag.

I drove to LA and pulled up in the lot of Granny's church. I walked the distance to the small cemetery and placed the flowers I had purchased on her headstone.

"I have so much to tell you," I began and immediately broke down. I told her the story about Zeph having Mali killed,

about me killing Zeph, going to jail, and about my brothers' children. I could just picture her storming around heaven looking for Mali so she could tell him about his son. I then told her about Tina, Catrell, and the dragon smoke. After another hour or so, I figured I had literally blew her wig back, and headed back to my car. I drove to the cemetery where both of my brothers were buried.

"Hi, Mali," I said cheerfully, placing a bouquet of flowers on his headstone as well. I caught him up on all the happenings and talked to him about his son. I even told him about the girl in the park that I had fought. I then told him about Tina. I didn't want to make him so angry that he would go off and get kicked out of heaven, but I needed him to know all that was going on in the overrated world of the living. "And thanks, Big Bro, for pushing so hard for me to give Hitta a chance. He's the best thing that has ever happened to me and he will officially be your brother-in-law very soon. I love you, Mali."

I then walked to Zeph's gravesite and said a quick prayer for the Lord to protect me from any demons which might fly up from the abyss where Zeph was buried. There would be no flowers placed on his grave from me.

"You never cease to amaze me," I began. "You hid your brother's son from him, tried to extort money from your entire family, then had your brother killed. Not to mention the bullshit you tried to do to me. I would say I'm sorry for killing you," I said quietly. "But I don't want to lie to you. If you came back to life today I would do it all over again. By the way, your son is adorable. I'm raising him because your dump-truck baby mama abandoned him just like you did. Wow... Love is..." I said and laughed. "Well you take care and continue to Rest in *Pieces*. Oh one last question that I just *have* to know the answer to," I said anxiously. "What did Satan say when you told him that he's your real father?" I asked, and spit on my brother's grave.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I drove to 85<sup>th</sup> and Fig and made a left turn. I pulled up in my Granny's driveway and cut the engine. At least I no longer had to fight with Zeph for my parking spot at the curb.

I used my keys and let myself in. The house was stuffy and needed some air. I locked the bar door behind me and left the door open. I smiled as I spied Granny's good roaster sitting clean on the counter. Her cast iron skilletts were on the stove, cleaned and oiled, just as I had left everything after her repast. Her house was spotless, just like she would have had it herself.

I walked into the empty living room and spied the extra clean areas on the carpet where the furniture used to sit. I went through the bedrooms, then back to the kitchen. I remembered the last time we had gotten together as a family, and I could vividly hear Granny's words, *You don't go in a woman's kitchen lifting no lids or no pots, LaLa! You didn't learn that from me!* I couldn't help but laugh out loud as I reminisced on the times my family had spent together. Before I knew it, I was laughing so hard that I broke down crying. I sat down on the kitchen floor and cried for my granny, my brother, and for the ignorance and ungratefulness of my other brother. I also cried for the blessing of my nephews in my life, and decided I wouldn't stress on it anymore. I would lean on God and He would guide me to turn those three boys into the best men they could possibly be.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

I picked myself up off the floor and locked up the house. I drove in the direction of the house that Mali and Zeph used to live in. I then decided to pass up the street. There was no reason for me to even stop. The realtor was handling the rental of their home, and I would allow him to handle the rental of Granny's too. I turned my car in the direction of the freeway, and merged my ass in with the best of them.

"Baby, I'm home," I called to Hitta. He came down the stairs carrying Marshay who was a crying screaming mess.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Uh..." Hitta stuttered, and didn't fully meet my eyes. "He just...uh..."

"Spit it out! What happened?" I asked.

"Auntie LaLa!" Mali eased quickly down the stairs with Catrell behind him. "Catrell told me a story!" he said happily.

"Yeah, uh...Auntie LaLa just got in, y'all let her get settled," Hitta said.

"A story about what?" I asked, ignoring Hitta. I could barely hear over the cries of Marshay.

"Come on now, y'all," Hitta repeated. "Babe, what's for dinner?" he asked, trying to distract me from Mali's conversation.

"The Three Pit Bulls!" Little Mali yelled in excitement, jumping up and down. Marshay began screaming like the Pit Bulls were right in the kitchen, and sniffing at his heels. I was livid.

"Catrell! Hitta! Really?" I asked, taking Marshay from Hitta's arms.

"I want to live in the forest like Goldilock!" Mali exclaimed. I turned to look at Hitta, who looked everywhere except at me.

"Sorry, Babe," he said shamefully. "But I didn't know he would tell the story," he said, indicating Catrell.

"Catrell, what did I tell you about that story?" I asked.

"Not to tell it," he said, staring up at me.

"You scared Marshay, Catrell. Now say you're sorry," I said. He did. "I need to make dinner. Everybody except Marshay, leave my kitchen."

Me too, Babe?" Hitta asked incredulously.

"*Especially* you," I clarified. "Bye."

I sat Marshay in a chair and turned on some music. He watched me move around the kitchen as I put away all the pot and pans I had brought from Granny's. I was glad I decided to keep them when I donated the rest of the stuff in the house.

I fried some chicken, made mashed potatoes, corn, a salad, and Hawaiian rolls. I fed all my boys, and Hitta bathed them and put on their pajamas.

Beyonce' was so happy to be in the spotlight that she couldn't contain herself as they all played with her in the middle of the floor. A much disgusted Jay-Z sat on the bottom stair and eyed her like she was the biggest turncoat ever. Marshay went over and sat on the step next to the cat. They stared at each other, wondering what the other was up to. Jay-Z took a tentative step onto Marshay's lap.

Hitta quickly answered his phone as it blared Tupac's *Fuck the World*. He looked around nervously, causing me to laugh.

"Watts up, Li'l Homie?" he asked. "Oh hell yeah, she told me about that bull--"

"Heyyyy!" I yelled loudly talking over Hitta. "Why don't we all go upstairs and let Hitta talk on the phone?" I suggested. Beyonce' looked at me as if I was simply jealous of all the attention she was getting, then turned back to what she was doing.

"Sorry, Babe," Hitta apologized. "It's cool. They can stay. I'll be careful," he smiled. We all got up and headed up the stairs anyway, taking Beyonce' with us.

"But yeah, though, she told me Homie," he said, getting back to his call. Ay, that was good looking out. I appreciate that. I owe you one." He seemed to be listening intently. We were barely to the top of the stairs when I heard his entire mood change. "What? Man, that nigga won't see another day! I wish like fuck he would!" he yelled angrily. I hurried the kids into their room and closed the door. I went back down the stairs. "I'll be out there to pay him a visit. He know good and damn well he don't want it! I saw that bitch in Dulan's one day talking

to my girl and he wouldn't even look at me." I knew at that moment that he was talking about my ex-man, J-Bone. Hitta's eyes met mine. I turned and went back up the stairs and went in the boys' room.

I sat in the giant race car shaped bean bag chair that sat in the corner of the room. I found it to be surprisingly comfortable. Marshay came over and climbed up in my lap. Together we sat, watching the other two boys as they ran over Beyonce's tail, paws, ears, and belly with their race cars. She lay perfectly still and allowed them to take advantage of her. I almost laughed out loud at the memory of Catrell calling her a ho. He might not have been too far off.

They seemed to love their new beds, and the lowest bed was perfect for Marshay. He climbed up on the little step and dived into his bed. Catrell had asked if he could have the top bed and that was fine with us. I had him climb up there to prove that he could do so and he did very well. He then turned over on his stomach and shimmied back down. Little Mali seemed perfectly content on the other bottom bed that was only about a foot higher than his little brother's.

"What y'all up in here doing to my girl?" Hitta asked, opening the door. Although he tried to hide it, I could still see the tension in his face. Marshay was asleep on my lap, and the other two were laid out in the middle of the floor. Hitta put them in their beds, and I followed him to our room. I took a quick shower, and when I got out, Hitta was going in. We stood on opposite sides of the bed, watching each other intently. I knew he was waiting on me to ask what his conversation was about, but I wasn't doing it. If he wanted me to know, he would tell me. We slid between the sheets. I immediately jumped up and ran to my office. Why hadn't I thought about it before? Hitta came in behind me.

"What are you doing, Babe?" he asked.

"Facebook," I replied simply.

"Facebook?" he asked. "You got up out the bed to see what's being posted?" he asked irritably.

"No. I got out of bed to see if I can find these kids' mama on there," I explained. He nodded appreciatively.

I went to the search field and typed in her first name. I wasn't sure if I had spelled it right, but I was about to find out. I didn't have her last name, but that profile pic wasn't lying. There she was, smiling like all was well in the world. I clicked on her name and pulled up her profile. I couldn't see everything because we were far from friends, but I saw what I needed to see. She didn't use her last name, she used some dumb shit that said Tanazha Theoneyoudreamabout. *Bitch, the only ones dreaming about you are your kids.* I looked for relatives, friends, and significant others. She hadn't posted recently, actually for about the past nine months, but that didn't matter. I read the comments on some of her posts, and clicked on the name that I saw was the most recurrent. It was a woman named Bloncea Michelle. I typed her name into the search field. I then clicked on the message button. It said 'Active Now'. I began typing.

*My name is LaLa. I see from your fb profile that you are friends with Tanazha. Please give her the following message for me:*

*I will give you twenty-four hours to come pick up your two sons before I file for custody of them. Once I do that, I guarantee you will not get them back. That was some bitch-ass shit you did abandoning your kids like that and leaving some punk-ass little note explaining why. Especially after I offered you a place to stay. You gave me a fake number, a fake address for your sister, and some fake ass love for my nephews. (You hoes ain't loyal.) They are doing well (not that you give a damn being that you haven't called them one time), but I just thought you would like to know. Hope things are working out for you with your man that doesn't like kids. Just thought I'd be nice and give you one last chance to get your kids back. If you don't want it, that's fine too. They are doing great here with us. You have my number, you might want to use it. LaLa.*

Not a whole minute later, a message notification popped up on my screen:

*Calling her now.*

A few minutes later, another notification popped up:

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

*I'm Tanazha's cousin Bloncea. I don't know what's going on, but omg. I can't believe this. I called her, and she said she hasn't decided what she wants to do yet. Can you give her a little more time? Maybe a week or so?*

I messaged back:

*No. This isn't a day-care center, it's my home. Either they're going to be a part of this family or they're not. I'm not going to allow my man and my nephew, nor myself, to get attached to them only to have her come get them in six months. These aren't puppies, they are boys. Twenty-four hours.*

Notification:

*I understand. I don't know what to say because this isn't the first time it's happened. She did it to me too a couple of years ago. We were all at a birthday party for my daughter, and when it came time to go, no one could find her. She had left the boys. They ended up staying with me for about four months before she came back for them talking about she had to get away. I'm very sorry. I wish there was more I could do.*

I typed a simple response:

*Me too.*

"Damn, Babe. So this bitch just dumps them off when she gets tired of them. It ain't got nothing to do with not being able to take care of them. She doesn't want to take care of them," Hitta said angrily.

"She has until tomorrow to make up her mind. That's it," I said with finality. We returned to our bed, and I was just about to doze off to sleep when my phone started ringing. Hitta sat up in bed as I reached over and grabbed it. *Private number*. I put it on speaker. "Hello?" I answered.

"Give them a good home," she said quietly. I didn't even respond. I hit the end button. *Kill yourself*.

Hitta chose not to speak, and laid down in the bed and pulled me into his arms. I guess we were about to be the proud parents of three sons...all at the same time. I would place the call first thing in the morning. All chances for change of minds had passed. Tina had no options, so she wasn't even a thought.

I lay awake for a while, as Hitta lay awake next to me. We held hands beneath the sheets, but exchanged no words. When the sun came up the next morning, I left Hitta in bed, and went to look in on the boys. I stood in shock, staring at the beautiful picture of the three little boys who weren't sure how they fit into each other's lives, but somehow knew that they did. They were all knocked out on Marshay's bed; his brother sleeping soundlessly on one side of him, and Catrell asleep on the other. Marshay slept sandwiched in the middle. I silently closed the door and made my way down the stairs. Hitta came down shortly after me.

"Good morning, Baby," I said. "I thought you were still asleep."

"You know I can't sleep right if you're not there," he said. "But did you look in the boys' room, Babe?" he asked in awe. I smiled and nodded. "You think he had a bad dream or something?"

"I don't know. But whatever it was, it worked."

"What are you doing today, Babe? I'm going to the shop for a minute," he said. I flashed back to the phone call he was on last night. *I'll be out there to pay him a visit.* He still hadn't elaborated on the phone call and I still hadn't asked.

"Okay, Baby," I said skeptically.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," I lied. "I'm going to do some calling around to some child welfare lawyers."

"Alright. Well don't stress, Babe. Whatever is meant to be will be," he said, kissing me and heading back up the stairs.

"Auntie LaLa, I'm up now," Little Mali said.

"Hi Mali! Did you sleep well in your new bed?" I asked. He nodded. "Teeth brushed?" Again he nodded. "Hungry?"

"No," he stated.

"Well how about just a little cereal?"

"Okay," he agreed and climbed up on a chair. I set a bowl of cereal in front of him. Catrell showed up shortly after, with Marshay walking behind him. I put out two more bowls.

"Alright then, Y'all," Hitta said, coming down the stairs.

“What about me too?” Catrell demanded. “I want to go!”

“Not today, Bruh. But I’ll be back in a little bit,” Hitta said. I eyed him suspiciously. He wore blue jeans, with a red tank top and a pair of red suede Timberland boots. His fine ass was pissing me off! How dare he not share with me the contents of the phone call? He grabbed his keys, kissed me, and walked out the door.

I waited until the boys were all occupied, then sat down at the table and made some phone calls. The first person I called was the lawyer who had worked on my case. He referred me to another lawyer who specialized in child custody hearings. I had no idea what I was doing, so I just told her the story, starting with Tina and Catrell, then moved on Tanazha and her sons. The lady remained silent as she listened intently.

“Sounds like all these boys have had it really rough. Are you positively sure you want full custody of these boys? If you’re sure, we can proceed, but I will need to obtain a temporary placement order for them to be able to stay with you for now. Being that your grandmother already had temporary custody of your nephew, that one will be the easier case. Do you still have the letter, and the text from the mother of the children?” she asked.

“Yes, I saved the letter, and took a screenshot of the text and locked it in my phone,” I assured her. “But I have no birth certificates for the other two boys, and no other information on them except their names.”

“Can you send me that information? And I am going to need to see Catrell’s birth certificate. You mentioned something about his father though. Is he still in the picture?”

“I haven’t seen nor heard from him since my grandmother died, but he didn’t have any problem at all with Catrell staying with me. He hasn’t called or anything,” I answered. “I can speak to him if that will make things easier.”

We talked for a while longer and ended the call, with the promise that she would call me back as soon as she was able to look into some things.

I checked on the boys, then went into my office and dialed the number I had for Catrell's grandmother. She gave me the number for Catrell's father.

"LaLa, how have you been doing?" he asked. "I've been meaning to call you, actually. How is Catrell doing?"

"He's great. We haven't heard from you in a while. Is everything alright?" I asked.

"Actually, LaLa, I'll be coming to get him in the next day or two. I've been awarded custody!" he said happily.

"Wait, what? What do you mean?" I asked. "Nobody has contacted me! I just saw Tina the other day and she didn't mention anything about that."

"Well, she called me a couple of days ago and asked if I wanted to take Catrell. I thought about it, and it's time I step up and be a real father to him, instead of the part-time father I've been being. My lawyer drew up the paperwork and Tina signed full custody over to me. The documents are notarized and considered binding. I'm his father, LaLa. I have every right to have my son," he reasoned.

"You're just realizing that you're his father? And the only reason Tina did that bullshit is because I told her I was taking him away from her permanently. She was smoking crack in front of him when he went to visit her at that program! Did she tell you that?" I asked angrily.

"Which is all the more reason why he needs to be with his father," he said quietly. "Not to mention that you were just released from prison, weren't you?"

"It wasn't prison," I snapped. "It was the County Jail, and all charges against me were dropped!"

"With all due respect, LaLa, there wouldn't have been any charges in the first place if the police didn't think you did anything. I will be there tomorrow morning to pick up my son. Please make sure he is ready," he said.

"He doesn't know you like that! He hasn't even seen you in almost a year!" I argued.

"LaLa, he's only four years old. *Just* turned four. He will adapt just fine. Were you even home for his birthday?" he asked.

"What the fuck does that have to do with anything?" I asked. "You think he should have stayed three because I wasn't home for his birthday? He had Hitta here with him, who, I might add, has been a far better father to him than you ever have!"

"This is all unnecessary, LaLa. What's done is done. Just have him ready," he ordered, and ended the call.

I dialed the lawyer whom I had spoken to only minutes before, and told her what had just happened.

"Is it legal?" I asked desperately.

"Perfectly legal," she answered sympathetically. "If the mother signed over full custody, the only thing left to do was to get it signed by a judge, and it sounds like he took every legal step that needed to be taken. I'm sorry, LaLa, but Catrell has to go with his father. Even if you battle it out in court, you more than likely will not win against his biological father. I'm so sorry," she repeated. "We will proceed with the other two boys, but I'd advise you to let Catrell go. That's a losing battle."

I got off the phone and made sure my door was closed. I cried as if my brother and Granny were dying all over again. Catrell got on my last damn nerve, but I loved him like he was my own. How would I tell him that this would be his last day with his Auntie LaLa, his Uncle Hitta, and his newfound cousins, and that he would be going to live with a man with whom he had only occasionally spent a few nights?

I dialed Hitta's number. It went straight to voicemail. I called back five times and was sent to voicemail each time.

I sat for a while longer and practiced what to say to my nephew. No matter how many times I rehearsed, I broke down before the first sentence was complete.

I walked across the hall and stuck my head in the door. They were sitting in a circle with a group of Army men and Legos scattered in the center.

"Catrell," I called. "Come with me for a second." He got up off the floor and followed me down the stairs. I sat down and pulled him onto my lap.

"What's wrong, Auntie LaLa?" he asked, probably wondering why the hell I was squeezing him so tightly. I didn't ever want to let him go, but how could I explain why?

"Do you remember when you lived with Granny, but you would go spend the night with your daddy and your other granny sometimes?" I asked.

"It was no fun!" he exclaimed. "All church!"

"Well, Catrell, your daddy wants you to come and live with him," I said, figuring it best to just get it all out in the open. "See, Hitta and I aren't the only ones who love you. Everybody loves you so much that we all want you with us. But your daddy gets to make the final decision, and he would really love it if you could come and live with him. Hitta and I would still come see you and you could come spend the weekends sometimes," I reasoned, damn near choking on the tears I was holding back.

"No, thank you," he said politely. "I'll stay here."

"Catrell, you *have* to go, Baby. Your daddy will be here in the morning to pick you up. I'm so sorry," I said, with tears running down my face. He burst into tears and slid down to the floor, where he sat and cried, his little heart shattered into a million pieces.

"I don't want to go!" he screamed. "I don't want to go!"

"I know, Baby. I'm so sorry," I said. There was no consoling him. He didn't want to be held and didn't want to hear anything I had to say. I sat next to him on the floor, crying my own tears. Tina definitely hadn't heard the last from me.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Catrell had worn himself out crying and had fallen asleep. He was knocked out on the couch. I dialed Hitta's number repeatedly, and still, no answer. I checked on the other two boys and found Marshay to be asleep on his bed. Little Mali sat building a tower out of Legos that was nearly as tall as he. Beyonce' sat observing his every action, as if she too were assisting in the construction of the building.

When I made it back down the stairs, Catrell was sitting up on the couch.

"Hi, Catrell," I said, and sat down next to him. He didn't speak. "Do you want to talk about it?" I asked. He shook his head, as tears welled up in his eyes.

"I want Hitta," he said.

"Hitta is at work, Baby. He'll be here soon," I promised, even though I had no idea if he would be or not.

"Can Beyonce' and Jay-Z come?" he asked.

"I can call and see," I said, but already knew the answer. There was no way in hell Catrell's dad would let him show up with a dog and cat. But I would ask him. All he could say was no. I called and asked. He said no.

"Can I talk to Catrell?" he asked before I ended the call.

"Catrell, your dad wants to talk to you," I said, holding out the phone.

"No!" he yelled.

"I'm sure you heard that," I said.

"So you actually gave him a choice of whether or not he wanted to talk to me? He's four. Make him get on the phone," he ordered.

"He said he doesn't want to talk. He's upset. I just told him he's going to live with you and his dog and cat can't come. If he doesn't want to talk to you, I'm not going to make him."

"Wow, LaLa. You really would make a great mother. Letting a four-year-old run you. Looks like Tina came right on time," he said sarcastically.

"The boy don't want to talk to your boring ass. And yeah, praise the crack-head for her awesome decision of making her son miserable. You're just as stupid as she is. He'll be ready to go in the morning. And make sure you bring me the court-signed and notarized documents or you won't get anything but the door slammed in your face," I informed him and ended the call.

I sat talking to Catrell for a while, even though he wouldn't respond. When Marshay woke up, I made lunch for the boys and we all sat in the living room watching movies together for the next few hours.

When we were bored with that, we gathered up some stuff and went for a walk around the neighborhood. Catrell collected his sticks for Beyonce' and showed the other two boys how to do the same. After all, it would now be their responsibility to ensure that Beyonce' had new sticks, even though she never looked at them twice.

Hitta still wasn't home when we made it back. I dialed his phone; no answer. I was livid. I put all three boys in the bathtub, dressed them, and cleaned up the bathroom. Still, no Hitta.

I was starting to get a little nervous, and was thinking the worse. *What if something had happened to him? What if he was arrested, or hurt...or worse?*

"Catrell, what do you want for dinner? You get to decide tonight," I said.

"No food," he replied. He was so sad that it was heartbreaking. He seemed to be thinking it over. "A taco," he said simply.

"You got it," I smiled. I started preparing dinner as the boys sat watching a Batman movie.

"Where is Hitta?" Catrell asked, coming to stand in the kitchen.

"He's at work, Baby," I said. Hell, I didn't know where the hell he was, but it sounded good.

"Will he see me?" he asked. I knew he wanted to know if he would be able to see Hitta before he left the next morning.

"Of course!" I answered, with false assuredness. He looked at me like he didn't know whether to believe me or not.

I had nearly finished cooking when Hitta came in the front door. Catrell jumped up and ran to him. Hitta picked him up.

"I'm leaving," Catrell informed him.

"You are?" Hitta asked, thinking Catrell was just talking like usual. "Are you taking Beyonce' and Jay-Z with you?" he asked playfully. "And Auntie LaLa too?"

"No. Just me," Catrell said, and burst out crying. I glared at Hitta. Had he answered his punk ass phone at some point during the day, he would have known what the fuck was going on in his household. Instead, he said the exact thing that only made the situation worse. I shook my head in disgust.

"Catrell gets to go live with his father," I said, in mock happiness. "He'll be here to get him in the morning." Hitta looked at me questioningly.

"I've been trying to call you all day so I could tell you what was going on," I informed him in an accusatory tone.

"I don't want to go, Hitta," Catrell cried. "I want to stay!"

"Let me talk to LaLa for a second, okay? Then we'll talk," Hitta promised. He set Catrell down, and came closer where he wouldn't be heard. "What's going on?" he asked.

"I just told you what's going on. He's going to live with his father," I repeated.

"But why? How?" he asked.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

"After I went to see Tina and I told her I was seeking full custody of Catrell, she called his father and said she wanted to sign her rights over to him. A judge approved it, and the rest is history," I said.

"Damn, Babe. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," I confirmed. "He wanted to take the dog and cat with him but his father said no."

"And he didn't care about what Catrell might want?"

"Hitta, he's four. It's not his decision. He might be crying today and ecstatic about being there tomorrow," I pointed out.

"This is fucked up," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry I wasn't here, Babe. I had some shit that needed to be handled."

"Yeah, I know," I said simply. "That's not my focus right now though."

"I know. But, I apologize for not being there when you needed me," he said.

"It's okay. Don't even trip. There was shit to handle that's way more important than returning seventeen annoying ass phone calls," I said sarcastically.

"Don't be like that, Babe. I didn't know what was going on."

"It's not like I wasn't trying to tell you. Damn, would it have been so hard to take two minutes to return a fuckin' phone call? Seriously? You'd be having a damn fit if I did that shit to you! I thought something had happened to your ass. The least you could have done was sent a fucking text that said 'leave me the fuck alone!' You couldn't even take time to do that! Ain't no telling what the fuck you were out doing!"

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked angrily. "Oh you think I was with another bitch?"

"What the fuck do you mean by 'another', nigga, 'cause I ain't no bitch! And like the fuck I said, ain't no telling what you were out doing!" I repeated, attempting to keep my voice down.

"LaLa, come on. You know good and well I ain't no dirty ass nigga. I'm faithful to a fuckin' fault to your ass. I'm

that same nigga that sat here and waited *faithfully* for your ass to come home from jail. You think I'd wait until you touch down before I go fuck with somebody? Really?"

"I don't know if you were waiting faithfully or just waiting! Only you know the real answer to that. Oh, you and whoever you were waiting 'faithfully' with," I said.

"LaLa, come on now, Babe. You know you don't believe that shit so don't say anything you can't take back."

"All I know is my nephew, *who is supposed*, to be your nephew as well, was crying for you today because he was devastated. Not one time throughout your shit-handling day did you think to yourself 'Wow...I've been gone since early this morning, let me call and see if my Babe and those boys are alright.' But that's neither here nor there. My baby is leaving for good in the morning and I want to spend as much with him as I can. If you choose to partake in our time together, that's fine. If you do not, that's fine too. Either way, my time belongs to him right now."

"Can I go with 'Trell?" Little Mali asked, walking up to me and staring up into my face.

"Uh...sorry, Baby, no. You have to stay here with your Auntie LaLa," I said sympathetically.

"And your Uncle Hitta," Hitta interjected quickly. I smirked and rolled my eyes.

"Do it again," he said through clenched teeth and a fake smile his face.

"Okay," Mali said, and went to the living room.

"Mali, can you tell the boys to come and eat?" I called.

"Yes!" he answered.

I made plates for everyone, but passed on one for myself. Hitta and his fuckery had completely ruined my appetite. I had expected Catrell to sit and pick at his food, but he surprised me by eating his taco and wanting another which he ate the majority of.

Hitta was in the living room with the boys, and I was cleaning up the kitchen when my phone started to ring.

"Hey, Simba," I said.

"Hey. LaLa, you're not going to believe this," she informed me, raising my curiosity.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Girl, the nigga J-Bone..."

"What about him?" I asked, hoping she would say he was dead. Zeph was probably waiting on him so that they could be roommates.

"He's in the hospital. He got his dick shot off!" she exclaimed.

"Shot off? What kind of shit is that? How does that even happen?" I asked.

"Girl, you heard me. Shot *off*. It blew into a million pieces and wasn't no chance of having it sewn back on. The shit it gone."

"Damn, they should have just killed him. Who wants to live without that essential piece? But how did you find out?" I asked.

"Coby told me. She called me earlier. Apparently the bitch Bria was screaming and hollering on the phone and somebody went and told Coby what had happened. Coby called me on that illegal ass phone and I called somebody else. They verified it, Girl. Yep..."

"That's some cold shit. I almost feel bad for him...*almost*," I clarified.

"I don't like to see nothing bad happen to people either, but karma is real, girl. He's done too much shit to you for you to be feeling sorry for his ass," she reminded me.

"Right," I said. "And besides, fuck him. I wonder what all them ho'es he cheated on me with will have to say now? I bet it's not so funny anymore," I said.

"Exactly. People who go around hurting other people always get theirs in the end. What goes around, comes around," Simba said.

"Catrell is leaving to go live with his dad tomorrow," I blurted out.

"Did I just hear you right?" she asked. "The baby is leaving y'all? I know he is pissed about that one."

"He's so hurt, Simba," I said. I told her what Tina did after my visit.

"But why should Catrell have to suffer because her ass is mad?" she asked angrily. "Man, people are a trip, LaLa. That's not cool at all. Girl, let me get off this phone before I go to cussing. That shit just pissed me off. I just wanted to tell you what happened with J-Bone."

"Love you, Girl. Talk to you later."

"You still mad?" Hitta asked, coming to stand in the kitchen.

"I have to start getting Catrell's stuff together," I said, and walked past him. "Keep him down here with you, please."

I trudged up the stairs and went to my baby's room. I started by getting all his little clothes together, then I stopped. Why was I sending him with all the stuff Hitta and I had spent our money on? Especially since his sorry ass daddy had another son who was only a little younger than Catrell. He wouldn't be dressing the boy in all my baby's fly gear. I pulled everything back out of the bag and put in a few t-shirts and some jeans. I then grabbed a pair of his tennis shoes and a pair of boots. I left three pairs of his pajamas and packed up the rest. I packed some socks and some underwear. His daddy could buy everything else. I packed up some of his favorite toys and left the others. He would still have stuff at our house for when he came to spend the night. I would have to talk to his dad about letting him stay with us sometimes. I held up his little minion pajamas, and used them to cover my mouth as I cried into them. I couldn't believe it was really happening. My baby was sleeping in his new bed for only the second, but last time.

"You okay, Babe?" Hitta asked, stepping inside the door. He could clearly see that I wasn't, and came over to where I sat on Marshay's bed. I let him pull me into his arms and hold me. I would do anything to be able to keep Catrell. I began to say a silent prayer as I sat crying on Hitta's shoulder. *Lord, please do something. I will give up anything if you let me keep my nephew. Granny said I'm not supposed to try to bargain with you...but I just want you to know that I'm willing to give up anything or anyone...even Hitta.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Hey, you’re in our bed!” Catrell giggled as the boys came into the room. I quickly wiped my eyes. “You look funny!”

“Oh, I do, huh?” I said and tickled him. “You guys ready to go to bed?” They all nodded. “Prayers first,” I reminded them. They all hit their knees and said their prayers. Hitta and I tucked them into their beds and kissed them good night. I stood looking down at Catrell, brushing the curls away from his angelic face. “I love you so much,” I said, with my voice cracking. “You’re going to be okay. Hitta and I will always be here for you. I promise,” I said, and laid my head on his little chest as I cried.

“LaLa, come on,” Hitta said, pulling me away. “You can’t do that, Babe.” I didn’t fight Hitta as he pulled me away. We were almost to the door when I heard my baby’s voice.

“I love you too, Auntie LaLa.” I turned to look back at him. “I talked to God about you.”

“I talked to him about you too,” I said, and blew him a kiss.

I went directly to the French doors in my room and stepped out onto the balcony. I stared up at the heavens and silently asked God if He was going to send an answer or if He planned to leave me hanging. He needed to let me know something before Hitta fell asleep and I had to wake him up to pack. I was serious about my half of the bargain.

Hitta came out and leaned against the railing. I felt his hand on my back and looked over at him.

"I love you," he said simply. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"About Catrell leaving, or about you shooting J-Bone's dick off?" I asked quietly. I heard his sigh and awaited an answer that never came. "This isn't supposed to be happening, Hitta. I'm supposed to keep what's left of my family together. I'm supposed to put him in Head Start next week and then watch him go to kindergarten. I'm supposed to embarrass him by taking too many pictures of him and his prom date, then scream the loudest at his graduation."

"Who's to say you won't still get to do those things, LaLa? You don't know what might happen from one day to the next. Hell, dude might be ringing the doorbell by sunset tomorrow trying to bring his little ass back if you know your nephew," he said, and I found it in me to laugh a little. "We have to go through the motions, Babe. Let that God you believe in so much do the rest. I even talked to Him myself earlier. I told Him that I would leave...if He would let Catrell stay. I'm just waiting on His answer." I looked up into Hitta's eyes, and found that they were wet like mine. I hugged him as tight as I could. I then called upon God, and told Him that if He found me worthy and not being selfish, that I would like to keep both of the men in my life. Of course it was entirely up to Him.

We went inside, and Hitta went to shower. When he came out, he climbed onto the bed next to me. We stared at the TV. Neither of us was really watching it, but it was a welcome distraction.

"I'm going to shower," I said. He nodded, looking at me thoughtfully. When I came out he was still sitting in the same position. He watched me as I approached the bed.

"Are you going to elaborate on what you said a little while ago?" he asked, moving so that he was laying between my legs as I sat up in the bed with my back resting against the headboard. I looked down at him and directed my attention to the TV screen. "LaLa, the homies was hanging out and the little homie that was at the park was telling them what happened with

the bitch you fought and how she tried to jack y'all. The nigga J-Bone was there. He said he saw y'all when you were walking to the park. He knew what you had on and everything. He said if you had been by yourself, he would have raped you. The nigga said at the first available opportunity, he was gon' get you, Babe. Talking about you think you better than everybody. He said a bunch of foul ass shit that you don't need to know about. That shit doesn't matter."

"What if the police come, Hitta?" I asked, in concern.

"Babe that nigga ain't gon' give me up. J-Bone knows there wouldn't be anywhere he could hide if he gave me up. My homies love me, Babe. They loved Mali and me because we give back to the 'hood. We look out. Half the niggas you see working at the shop is from the 'hood. People just don't know it because they're about business when they're working. Mack, the one that can't stop asking about Simba, is from the 'hood."

"He is?" I asked. "I never knew that."

"You weren't supposed to. That's a place of business, Babe. J-Bone ain't shit. He used to be cool as hell until he started acting like the nigga Zeph, doing all that scandalous shit. But he went too far when he said that shit about raping you. I wasn't about to let that go. And I don't put shit past nobody. If the nigga said it, he would probably try it." I sat stunned at what Hitta was saying. Did J-Bone really despise me that much? Yes. He did. That's exactly why he did all that shit to me that he did, because even though he claimed to love me, deep down, he was jealous of me and all I stood for. *Sorry, Dickless, try again.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

**W**e lay awake talking for a while, and fell asleep just when the sun was rising. I woke up what seemed like minutes later, to an empty spot where Hitta should have been.

I walked to the boys' room and opened the door. Hitta sat in the racecar beanbag chair, with Catrell asleep on his lap. He looked up at me as I entered the room, his eyes wet as he attempted to hold in his tears. I completely understood; I felt the same way.

In my fantasy, Catrell's father would call at the last minute and say he had changed his mind. The reality was, that it was all in God's hands and all we could do was continue to pray for His will to be done.

I left Hitta sitting with Catrell, and walked dejectedly down the stairs to the kitchen. I sat down at the table and cried. I felt as if I was letting Catrell down, and I knew that he was highly disappointed in me for not being able to save him.

The imaginary, tiny, red devil sitting on my shoulder told me to pick up the phone and call the program where Tina was located. The little, white-clad angel on my other shoulder told me to leave it alone and let fate do what it would do. I battled back and forth with both of them, then made the final decision to do, in my mind, the right thing. I picked up my phone and dialed the number to the program.

"Hello," said a sleepy man, who was probably supposed to be wide awake and doing his job of monitoring the women.

"Can I speak to the supervisor on duty please?" I asked.

"I wasn't asleep!" he suddenly yelled.

"I wouldn't give a damn if you were," I said exhaustedly. "I need a supervisor and it has nothing to do with you."

"Oh. Hold on please. I'll transfer you," he said in relief.

"This is Tammy. What can I help you with?" answered a woman.

"My name is LaDonna. I'm the sister of one of your residents," I began. I took a deep breath and ran down my story. Little did Tina know, I knew her like the back of my hand and would always stay one step ahead of her scandalous ass. She may have won the battle, but I would definitely win the war.

I was making Catrell's favorite breakfast, eggs on the circle bread, when the doorbell rang. Surely his dumbass daddy wouldn't show up this early. Seriously? I snuck a peek through the window. Sure enough, there he stood with an impatient look on his face. He was flanked on both sides by two uniformed police officers. I marched over to the door and flung it open.

"A little late, don't you think?" I asked sarcastically. "I mean, with the sun just coming up and all.

"I just want my son," he said irritably, holding up a piece of paper. I took it from him and scanned for signatures. He made a move as if he seriously thought I was about to let him walk in my front door.

"Wait here," I said and slammed the door in his face.

I walked slowly up the stairs and into the boys' room. Hitta still sat in the same spot holding Catrell. He must have heard the doorbell because he looked at me and nodded. He stood up with Catrell still in his arms. I wasn't about to wake up Catrell, so with tears streaming down my face, I kissed his head, cheeks and forehead. He stirred but didn't wake. Hitta carried him down the stairs and to the front door.

"If you know like I know, you won't wake him up," I said to Catrell's father as Hitta placed him in his arms. It was then that I knew, my nephew hadn't slept last night. He would

have been up wanting to know what I was making for his breakfast and what was taking so long. I looked at it as a blessing. It was easier on him to be asleep, and then wake up in his new home.

“LaLa, I know you don’t agree with this, but I just want to get to know my son,” he said, when Hitta ran back up the stairs to get Catrell’s stuff. I stared at him as if he were the teacher on Charlie Brown, speaking to her class in that annoying ass whomp, whomp, whomp language.

“So, when can we see him?” I asked. “Will he be able to spend the night or will he have to go home that same day? My other two nephews live here now as well, and they were getting pretty close. I would like for Catrell to be able to stay in touch with his family,” I said with tears burning his eyes.

“Other two nephews?” he asked incredulously. “When did that happen? Are they Tina’s kids?”

“No. Mali and Zeph’s,” I answered as Hitta came down carrying all the bags holding Catrell’s belongings.

“Oh, I guess I forgot to mention...Tina doesn’t want Catrell having any contact with you. You didn’t see it on the court order?” he asked.

“What!” I yelled, causing my nephew to wake up. He sat up in his dad’s arms, rubbed his eyes, and started screaming like somebody was standing over him with a gun. “What the fuck do you mean he can’t have any contact with me? You have full custody! The bitch signed over all of her rights! She can’t decide who he gets to see,” I pointed out.

“LaLa, look, it’s not my call,” he lied, as I stared at him suspiciously. “I surely wouldn’t want it that way. Catrell loves you. You’re all he knows. I would have no reason to keep him from you, but that’s what Tina wants.”

“You would let someone who smoked crack in front of your child, decide what’s in his best interest?” I asked in disbelief.

“How do you know it’s really true, LaLa?” asked Catrell’s dad. We could barely hear each other as my nephew continued to cry and hold out his little arms to Hitta. Hitta had to turn and walk away from the door. “I will rethink it, but for

now, it's best that he spend time getting to know the other side of his family."

"Are you fucking serious?" I yelled. "My baby isn't a liar! He didn't make that up! You know what? Just go, please. I can't believe you'd listen to that *smoker* and keep Catrell away from his family," I said, shaking my head in disgust. "You're no better than Tina. It's not her saying I can't see him, it's you, with your fake ass. You could have said that from the beginning!"

"Auntie LaLa!" Catrell cried. "I don't want to go, Auntie LaLa!" I was blinded by tears and wails, and deafened by his father telling him to cut out the nonsense. Hitta reappeared at the door and stood menacingly in front of him.

"Nonsense?" Hitta yelled. "He don't want to go with your bitch-ass! You don't give a fuck, Dude, that you're tearing apart a whole fucking family?"

"Sir, please back up," one of the officers said. Hitta focused on him as the man reached out to place a hand on his arm.

"Don't fuckin' touch me, man," Hitta said. The officer smirked, but pulled his hand back.

We all looked down at the same time, as a snarling and snapping Beyonce' came out of the blue and latched onto Catrell's daddy's pant leg. He kicked at the dog in an attempt to free himself.

"Beyonce'!" Catrell cried. "Beyonce', I don't want to go!" he screamed. I was no good. I couldn't even console myself so I knew there was no consoling Catrell as he kicked at his father.

"Um...one more thing, LaLa," his father began. "Is there a check or something that comes to you for him? If so, please have it switched over immediately."

"There is no check," I informed him with a wicked smile. "Your sorry ass would think we were doing it for the money," I said, shaking my head. "Money hungry bastard."

"Auntie LaLa! Uncle Hitta!" Catrell screamed desperately in one last attempt to get one of us to save him. "I want to stay! I'll share! No more bad words!" he promised

through his tears. I grabbed his little hand and squeezed it tightly. He looked at me with pleading eyes.

"I'll talk to you in my prayers," I told him, attempting a fake smile.

"In my prayers," he attempted to say over his own crying. I told my nephew one more time that I loved him more than life itself, picked up my dog, grabbed my man who looked like he was about to take off on anybody in close enough range, and closed the door. I set Beyonce' down on the floor and slid down the door.

I sat on the floor with my head in my hands and cried; not for myself, but for Catrell, who had no idea why he was being punished this way. He was being taken from the only family he had known since his great-grandmother and favorite uncle had died. He had found a replacement uncle in Hitta and was getting to know and trust his cousins.

Beyonce' curled up at my feet and lay whining and barking on the floor. We all should have jumped his ass; me, my man, and our dog.

"Babe," Hitta called, squatting down next to me. "Come on. It wouldn't be good to let the boys see you like this." He pulled me up off the floor and into his arms. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop crying. I felt as if I had awakened from a bad dream, only to find out it was all real.

"Auntie LaLa," Mali called, coming down the stairs. I turned and went into the bathroom.

"Ay, Bruh," I heard Hitta say.

"Where is Catrell?" Mali asked. "He's gone?"

"Yeah, man. His dad just came and got him," Hitta said, trying to sound normal.

I splashed cold water on my face, and looked at myself in the mirror. I looked horrible. I wiped my face with a towel, and with false cheer, walked back out to the kitchen.

"Hey, Mali," I said, with a mannequin smile plastered on my face.

"Catrell is gone," he informed me.

"Yeah, I know. But we're going to pray for him every night and every day okay? We'll pray that he gets to come see

us soon, and that he's happy at his new house," I said, and broke down all over again.

"LaLa, I'll finish breakfast, Babe. Go lay down for a while," Hitta suggested.

I went up the stairs and saw Marshay coming out of the bedroom.

"I go too," he said, and followed me into my room. I lifted him up onto the bed and he sat there looking at me as if I had cheated him out of some important shit. "Bye," he said, and climbed to the edge of the bed. I set him down on the floor, and he left without another word.

I was lying in my bed, wondering how Catrell was doing. I missed my baby as soon as the front door closed. I wished I could just hear his little voice. My eyes immediately snapped open as an image of J-Bone lying miserable, lonely, and dickless in a hospital bed flashed through my mind. I jumped up, showered, and dressed.

"Where are you going?" Hitta asked suspiciously as I came down the stairs with purpose. I had on a pair of dark blue jeans with a brown and tan print top, and a pair of brown Louis Vuitton four inch heels on my feet. I grasped my Louis Vuitton bag tightly as if someone might steal it. "LaLa, I'm talking to you," Hitta said. "Where are you going?" I stared at him blankly. "What's wrong, Babe?" Hitta asked, getting up from the table and coming to stand in front of me. I wanted to tell him that all was well, but I couldn't find the words to tell him. My mind had drawn a complete blank. "LaLa!"

"Uh...yeah. I'm fine. I just, forgot what I was about to say," I admitted. "I just have a lot on my mind, Hitta."

"I understand, Babe," he said, hugging me. "But where are you going though?" he repeated.

"I just need to get out for a minute. Maybe go for a drive or something."

"Dressed like that, LaLa?"

"Yes, dressed like this," I informed him. "Do I have to look like Raggedy Ann every time I leave the house?" I asked irritably.

“Girl, where the hell are you going?” he asked in agitation.

“To see Simba,” I lied.

“Okay, well say that then; and be careful. Call me.”

“Call you? So you can *not* answer the phone again? No, thanks,” I snapped.

“Lemme holla at you for a second,” he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the living room. “What the fuck is going on with you, LaLa?”

“Nothing,” I answered simply.

“Bullshit. So you think if I had answered my phone yesterday that would have stopped dude from taking Catrell? Do you really believe that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, with tears filling my eyes.

“LaLa, you need to stay home right now. You don’t need to be driving, Baby. Just wait until you calm down some.”

“Nigga, I’m not a child on a fucking Big Wheel who might accidentally pedal out in front of a car! I’m grown! Stop talking to me like I’m a fucking kid, Hitta! What the fuck are you even saying? Like I’m just mentally incapacitated and might get on the fucking freeway and kill myself! I’m fine! I’m fuckin’ fine, okay? Now can I have your damn permission to drive *my* car to go see *my* friend?” I asked sarcastically.

“Just be careful, Babe,” he said quietly, looking at me as if I were someone he had never seen before.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I stormed out the door and went to get in my car. I started it and sat there trying to remember where I was headed. I suddenly exited the car and went back in the house. Hitta immediately came over to me as I walked in the door. I threw my arms around him. He held me close to him and stroked my hair.

"We'll get through this, Babe. I know it's hard, but we'll get through it," he promised. "I'm not going to leave you all by yourself, so stop trying to make me." I just loved him so much that it hurt.

I felt like I was losing my mind. After the deaths of Mali, then my granny, I already felt as if I were at the end of my rope. I didn't feel shit about Zeph's non-factor, irrelevant to any-damn-thing ass. But losing Catrell had done irreparable damage to my heart. He was only a baby and should have been kept out of range for anyone to use as a weapon.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I don't know what I would do without you."

"You won't ever find out," he reassured me. "Be careful, Babe."

"I will, and I will call," I said and kissed him.

I got on the freeway and drove like a bat out of hell to get to LA. I put Simba on the speaker in my car.

"Hey, LaLa."

“Simba, do you know what hospital J-Bone is in?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Not off hand, but I can find out. I’ll call you right back,” she said.

I was nearly to my exit when Simba called back. I attempted to stay calm as I answered her call. She gave me the information I had requested.

I drove to the hospital where J-Bone’s sorry ass was laid up, and went to find out what room he was in. I took my newfound info and marched my ass up to his door. I peeked in to see if anyone was in the room. I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

“Hey, *Sister!*” I said sarcastically. “Damn, can’t even rape a bitch in peace anymore, huh? Always somebody around to fuck it up.”

“It wasn’t like that,” he said weakly. I could tell it was a combination of pain and pain meds.

“Sure it wasn’t, Jayshon. But that’s neither here nor there. Kind of like your dick, right? Neither here nor there,” I said and fell out laughing. Tears appeared in his eyes. “My granny used to always say, ‘Be careful not to fall in the ditch that you dig for somebody else.’ Now I know what she meant. I have never done anything to you, Jayshon, so for you to want to do something to intentionally hurt me, especially after all that you know I’ve been through, is very confusing to me. I mean, I took all your bullshit and still tried to hang in there with you. When I realized you weren’t going to change, I left. Is that grounds for you to plan to do something as hateful as to rape me?”

“I wasn’t serious when I said that.”

“Sure you were,” I laughed. “You were dead-ass serious. You just didn’t think it would get back to me or Hitta. But it did, and that’s why you get to be a woman like me now. You might as well go all the way and let these surgeons sculpt you a pussy. Well, I mean, I’m sure they sell fake dicks somewhere, so that’s always an option, but that’s your decision. Wow...I guess you really are a pussy-ass nigga!” I said, and was hollering laughing.

“Get the fuck outta here, LaLa!”

“Okay, *Jayshawna*...you take care, and I’m sure we’ll see each other again. I was just hoping you could shed a little light on the situation, but I see you’re not going to come real with it.” I was almost to the door when I stopped and turned around. “Don’t be discouraged, *Jayshawna*. I hear they’re even working on giving you guys your own bathrooms. I know some *gorgeous* transgenders and I’m sure they can give you some great beauty tips.” I blew him a kiss as tears streamed down his face. I smiled and left the room.

I was flying down Century and on my way to Inglewood when my phone rang.

“Yeah,” I said dryly.

“Bitch, you set me up!” Tina yelled. “You put drugs in that bag you brought me!” she cried.

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked innocently. “You’re my sister. What reason would I have to set you up?”

“LaLa, I’m in the County Jail! They’re going to send me to prison!”

“Well at least you can get the help you need, Tina. Don’t you worry about Catrell either, okay? He’s fine. He’s with his father now and you know how much his dad loves him,” I said sarcastically. “Hopefully all those bad dreams he was having about the *dragons* will end now that he’s safe. You take care, Hun,” I said.

“LaLa! How could you do this to me?” she screamed. I ended the call and smiled to myself.

I sat outside Simba’s house and dialed her number. She came out and waved me in.

“What’s up, girl?” she said, inviting me in with a smile.

“Simba, do you have the number to Coby’s phone?” I asked.

“Yeah, girl. Do you need it?” she asked.

“Call her for me, please.” She sat down on the couch while I sat across from her in a chair. She dialed the number then ended the call.

"She'll call me right back if she can. That way she knows it's me and not a set-up," she informed me. I nodded. "What's wrong? You alright?"

"You'll hear in a minute if she calls back," I said. A few minutes later, Simba's phone rang.

"Hey, Sis!" Simba greeted. "Someone wants to talk to you," she said secretively. She held out the phone for me.

"Hey, Boo!" I exclaimed. "Do you miss me yet?"

"LaLa? Hey! How're you doing out there? Hell yeah, I miss your psychotic ass!" she laughed.

"Coby, I need a favor," I said.

"Anything. You know that."

"My sister is in there. She just got there today," I informed her.

"Oh no problem, LaLa. You want me to look out for her?" she asked.

"Hell no," I said simply. "Give that bitch the blues. She had Catrell taken away from Hitta and me," I said sadly.

"What??? Aww, that's fucked up, LaLa. I'm sorry to hear that."

"I want every day that she has to spend in there to be just as miserable as my nephew is going to be. Don't get yourself in trouble Coby. You know how to do shit. Don't hurt the ho. Just make her life a living hell like she did to me, Hitta, and Catrell."

"I got'chu," she promised.

"I got you too," I responded.

"You know you ain't got to do that, LaLa," she said.

"Girl, stop. I got you regardless. I miss you, Boo! Hurry up and come home!"

"Yeah, hurry up!" Simba said in the background. "We sent your pictures!"

"Aww, y'all did? Good lookin' out," she said.

"Mostly at Chuck E. Cheese's, but we did take some," I laughed.

"That's cool!" Coby laughed. "But I better get off this phone."

"Okay, Hun. Take care of yourself."

"I'm sorry about your nephew, LaLa," she said sincerely.

"It's in God's hands, Boo," I said. "And thanks for everything." I ended the call and sat looking at Simba.

"Damn, LaLa. I feel so bad for Catrell," she said, with tears welling up in his eyes. "I hope he makes them people regret ever taking him away from his home."

"Me too, Simba," I agreed.

"Are you okay though, LaLa?"

"Not really. I feel like everyone in my family has died all over again," I confessed quietly. "I know that's his dad, but it doesn't make it any easier. He never wanted much to do with Catrell, other than letting him spend the night periodically. Now all of a sudden, he wants to play daddy. He's taking that baby from the only people he really knows. Dude thought I was getting a check for Catrell, and that it would be signed over to him. You should have saw his face when I told him I don't get a check," I laughed. "Girl, he was livid!"

"That's what his stuck-up ass gets!" Simba agreed. I stood to leave. "Girl, let me know if you need anything okay?"

"I will. Thanks for your help earlier too."

"Did you go see him, LaLa?"

"Yep," I said simply.

"Girl, you better never let Hitta find out. Good or bad, he ain't gon' have no understanding."

"He'd understand much more than you know," I said, and said my goodbye.

Approximately one hour later, I was putting my key in my front door. I called out for Hitta; no answer. The house was empty. I texted his phone to see where he was. He texted back and said he had taken the boys on a walk. Well, how many sticks did this dog need? I kicked off my shoes and took a seat on the couch. I battled back and forth with my own mind, then grabbed my phone.

"Hello?" Catrell's dad answered.

"This is LaLa," I said. "How is he doing?"

"He's fine," he said, trying to keep his voice low. "But I think it would be a good idea if you didn't call. It will only make the transition harder. You understand, I'm sure."

"Yeah, sure," I said sarcastically. "You don't want me to be able to even *talk* to him. It's bad enough you don't want us to see him, but we can't even talk to him?"

"Not yet. *I'll let you know when,*" he said, and ended the call before I could get another word in. I took a deep breath and decided against having a few of my homies go jack his ass up. It would only make the situation worse.

I sat deep in thought, wishing that my nephew were with me, asking me a thousand questions that I couldn't answer. I went up the stairs and sat in front of my laptop. I sat typing away, making 'J-Bone' a new and hated character in my book. I smiled to myself as I read over the words. I didn't even bother to change his name and there wasn't anything he could do about it. I also used Zeph, but changed his name to Zachariah. J-Bone and Zach were best homies, road-dawgs, and friends...they were also some undercover brothers, on the down-low, and in a very intimate relationship.

"What the fuck reason could you possibly have for going to see that nigga today, LaLa?" Hitta asked, pushing my door open so hard that it bounced off the wall with a loud bang.

I sat staring at him, trying to allow his question to penetrate my brain. He had caught me completely off guard. I had already made up my mind to tell him, but he didn't even give me a chance.

"Well, it wasn't a social visit, Hitta," I snapped. "I had some things I needed to say. They're said. Done deal."

"Don't fuckin' get smart," he said angrily. I could tell he was struggling to keep his voice down. "You left here this morning talking about you needed to get out of the house, when all along, you had planned on going to visit your muthafuckin' ex-man in the hospital."

"That's the key word, Hitta; 'ex.' That's all he is to me, an ex and an enemy. I didn't go sit and hold his damn hand. I don't have a logical reason for why I went, other than to tell him how I felt about him trying to plot on me when I had never

did anything to him. Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to do, but it wasn't the dumbest either. If you would have just came in like a normal fucking human instead of busting in here like the Incredible Hulk, I would have told you, but you didn't give me the opportunity."

"Girl, that's that bullshit," he said lamely, looking like he was trying to stay mad. I stood up and put my arms around him, looking up into his eyes. "That shit ain't gon' work, LaLa," he informed me.

"I'm sorry, Baby. I didn't mean to upset you," I apologized. "And if you don't want to be with me anymore, I understand," I said, trying to look pitiful.

"Ay, didn't nobody say all that," he said, pulling me back to him. "All I'm saying is, the nigga ain't no good and I don't want you anywhere near him. I don't care if he's laid up in the hospital or not. Do you get it?" he asked.

"I get it, Babe. It won't happen again," I promised.

"Auntie LaLa," Little Mali said, standing in the doorway.

"Hey!" I smiled. He carried a book under his arm that I was almost positive he couldn't read.

"Can we go to the zoo?" he asked hopefully.

"Well, sure," I said, looking at Hitta accusingly. He looked everywhere but at me. Then pretended like he was going to check on Marshay.

"Today?" Mali asked.

"Uh...today?" It's not like I had anything better to do. It was still pretty early in the day, and we had hours of daylight left.

"Hitta!" I called, when Mali happily went to tell Marshay that we were going to the zoo.

"What's up, Babe?" he asked, coming back into my office.

"We're going to the zoo."

"Oh, okay, Babe. Will you be back before it gets dark?" he asked.

"Wait a minute, Hun. I think you misunderstood. *We* are going to the zoo. That includes your ass too, since I'm sure

you're the one who sent him to ask me. So get ready. We'll be leaving in about fifteen minutes," I said and smiled sarcastically.

"Alright, Babe," he said skeptically. "But the zoo ain't really my thing."

"It ain't mine either, but it's going to be our thing today," I said with finality.

I went to my room and changed my clothes. Hitta came in behind me and put on a pair of Jordan shorts and his burgundy J's to match his tank top. He grabbed his shades and wallet then stood impatiently waiting for me to get ready.

"We're going to the zoo, LaLa, not the club," he said irritably. I turned to look at him, then returned my attention to the mirror. "There won't be one gorilla in the place that's gon' give a damn about how you look." I fell out laughing.

"I'll be ready in a minute. Can you check on the boys and make sure they have everything? And make sure they use the bathroom before we go."

The last thing I did was slip my feet into a pair of lime green and white suede Adidas to match the workout pants and matching tank top I wore.

"I'm ready," I announced, bouncing my fine ass down the stairs. Hitta looked at me and shook his head.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"Nothing. If you don't mind looking like a giant Now & Later," he mumbled.

"What did you just say?" I asked with my eyes narrowed.

"Can we go, Babe?" he asked, trying to not to laugh at his own joke.

Little Mali reminded me so much of Catrell, with his little backpack thrown over his shoulder like he was a grown man going off to work. We all shuffled out the door and headed off to the world of wild animals.

I would love to be able to say I enjoyed the day immensely, but that would be a damn lie. All I heard the entire day was, "LaLa, don't stand so close to that cage. LaLa, clearly that sign says not to feed the animals. LaLa, did I just see you

try to pet that thing? LaLa, you need to stop walking so far ahead." I was so tired of hearing my own name that I considered changing it at that moment. I felt like I was the same age as my nephews and that Hitta was our babysitter for the day.

"Where are we going to eat?" I asked, as we left the zoo.

"You don't seem to have enjoyed it that much," Hitta observed.

"Well maybe next time you can loosen my leash a little. I won't run too far," I said sarcastically. He was hollering laughing. "What's so funny, Hitta. I felt like I was there with my grandfather," I complained.

"I just wanted you to be careful, Babe."

"Careful of what?" I asked incredulously. "There are prisoners on death row who have a better chance of escaping than those animals do!"

"Did you guys have a good time?" he asked Mali and Marshay.

"Yes!" they yelled excitedly and in unison. I rolled me eyes. Hell, even they had more freedom than I did. Hitta was on me like a teacher on students on a field trip.

"Where are we eating?" I repeated in frustration.

"Chuck E. Cheese!" Mali interjected.

"You haven't seen enough animals for one day?" I mumbled. Hitta was dying laughing as we pulled up to a red light. I glanced over at the car next to us. The male driver of the Tesla gave me a discreet wave and a flirtatious smile. I quickly turned my head.

"Don't get dude fucked up," Hitta snapped.

"People can't be polite?" I laughed.

"Okay. I'll keep that in mind when you be bangin' on them bitches that come into the shop and flirt with me," he said, keeping his voice low.

"No, you'll keep that in mind when you're laid up in the ER getting stitches in your head," I corrected, and was dead serious. "Okay, Mali. Since we just went to Chuck E. Cheese's how about we have-" I began before Hitta cut me off.

"We're going to my mom's," he stated. I didn't argue, however I did give him my best side-eye. "What?" he laughed.

“You ain’t calling no shots with me and my boys!” I said playfully. “We might not have wanted to go all the way to LA just to eat. Next time, check with us first,” I demanded, to which he fell out laughing.

“Yeah! Check with us!” Mali laughed. Hitta looked over at me, then shook his head.

“I already know, Babe,” I said quietly. “He sounded exactly like Catrell.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

““W hen *exactly* did you plan on coming to see me, LaLa?” Hitta’s mother asked with a hand on her hip and a smirk on her face.

“I’m sure Hitta has told you that we’ve had a lot going on the past few days,” I explained, giving a discreet head nod over my shoulder. My two nephews filed in the door in front of Hitta.

“Mali and Marshay, this is Hitta’s mother Miss Barbara,” I said.

“Ain’t y’all the most handsome boys...” she said.

“What’s up, Mom? You weren’t busy were you?” he asked, kissing her cheek.

“You know I ain’t up to nothing around here. Catching up on the old episodes of *Law and Order*.” She said. “LaLa, I’m so sorry about Catrell.

“Thank you. I am too. I miss him so much and he just left this morning. Seems like he’s been gone for weeks.”

“I can’t believe my Mali had a son,” she said wistfully with a smile on her face. “He looks just like him too.”

“Yes, he does,” I agreed.

“Are you boys hungry?” she asked, and led them to the kitchen. She placed them at the table and started making plates. After she had them situated, she came back into the living room where Hitta and I sat.

“So Hitta, you know what you have to do. I don’t want LaLa calling me with no mess about how you ain’t pulling your weight with these boys. They’re just as much your responsibility as they are hers. I taught you better than that,” she reminded him.

“Mom, for real? You know I got this,” he said with a wave of his hand.

“Wave that hand at me again, Kornel, and you won’t wave it at another soul in your life,” she snapped. I died from laughing, came back to life, and died again.

“Why you gotta use my government name, Mom?” he asked irritably. “And LaLa I know you ain’t laughing with your Mystery Mixx looking ass.” Miss Barbara was laughing so hard that she had tears coming out of her eyes.

“Girl, you do! You do! Ooo, that was a good one!” she said as she tried in vain to catch her breath. “I used to love those, LaLa! They were my favorite,” she informed me as if that would make everything better. I narrowed my eyes in Hitta’s direction.

“Just kiddin’, Babe. You know I was just playing,” he said, trying not to laugh.

“Whatever,” I said.

“You kids need anything?” Miss Barbara asked the boys as she made her way to the kitchen to check on them.

Hitta got up and walked over to where I sat in a black leather, circular, love seat chair. I turned my head as he tried to kiss me.

“Uh-uhh, Bruh! You don’t like Mystery Mixx Now & Laters, remember?” I reminded him.

“Yes, I do, Babe,” he said simply. “I love them,” he informed me, bending to kiss me. I allowed him the privilege of doing so.

“Y’all going to eat?” Miss Barbara asked us. I shook my head no.

“Mom, will you make my plate please?” Hitta asked. She looked at him lovingly and went to do as he asked. I fixed a scowl onto my face. “What’s wrong with you?” he laughed, already knowing what I was about to say.

"Toddler," I mumbled.

"What did you say?" he asked. I sat shaking my head. "She likes to make my plates, Babe," he informed me. "You do it for me all the time."

"You're right, Baby," I agreed. "I know, Hun."

"Cut that out!" he said irritably. "Stop agreeing with me, LaLa!" I laughed heartily as his mother came back in, looking at him strangely.

"I ain't ever heard no man say that in my life," she informed us. "Where the hell did you get that shit from?"

"Mom, she's doing it on purpose!" he said, pointing a finger in my direction.

"Doing what?" I asked incredulously. "All I did was agree with you."

"See what I'm talking about, Mom? All that innocent type-shit! She know exactly what she's doing! You better cut it out, LaLa!" he demanded and went to the kitchen. "And I can hear y'all too!" he informed us as well fell all over each other laughing.

"He is crazy!" she said. "I only dropped him on his head one time when he was a baby. I didn't know the effects would last this long!"

"Oh really?" he asked, standing over us with a serious look on his face. "LaLa, are you going to eat before we leave?"

"No, Baby. I'm not hungry," I informed him.

"You haven't ate today," he reminded me.

"I know. Just not feeling it," I said. Miss Barbara looked sympathetically from Hitta to me.

"LaLa, your starving yourself isn't going to bring Catrell back," she said quietly, and walked to the kitchen.

"Babe," Hitta began, squatting down in front of me. "Do you want my mom to keep the boys tonight? You've had an overwhelming couple of days. You need some time doing nothing at all."

"No, Baby. They just got there. I don't want to do that to them. I want them to get used to the house and being around us as quickly as possible. They're still trying to absorb a lot too," I pointed out.

"I know that, Babe, but you need a minute to rest your mind. Nobody will fault you for that."

"I'll be fine," I said, trying to muster up a smile.

"Okay. But if you change your mind, let me know."

"I will," I promised.

We all thanked Miss Barbara and made our way towards our home. Hitta had to carry Marshay into the house; he woke up as soon as we got in the door.

"Where's Trell?" he asked innocently.

"He's with his daddy," I smiled.

"Oh," he responded. He forgot all about me and my sorry-ass explanation when Jay-Z came and distracted him.

"Let's get your bath in so you guys can go to bed okay?" I said.

"Can we watch TV for a while after?" Mali asked. Hitta had mounted a 50-inch flat screen TV on the wall in their room, and they had yet to be able to watch it. The channel would remain on either Nickelodeon or Disney kids. There was also a DVD player and DVD's so they could watch movies during the times I was working in my office.

"Sure," I agreed.

I bathed Marshay and put his pajamas on. Mali informed me that he wanted to put his pajamas on by himself. He came strolling into the room with his pajamas on, and haughtily informed Marshay that he wasn't a baby like him.

They got in their respective beds and I turned on the TV. Marshay's eyes were closing even before I settled on what they would watch. Mali lay back in his bed like a tiny king, watching an animation on the TV.

I tried my hardest to ignore Catrell's bed. It seemed as if it were calling out to me, asking me the whereabouts of its intended occupant. I quickly left the room and ran into Hitta in the hallway.

"You okay, Babe?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said. He followed me into the bedroom. "Just wondering how he's doing; that's all," I added sadly.

"I'm sure he's fine, LaLa," he assured me, pulling me into his arms. It seemed as if that were the only place I could

find any sanity anymore. I laid my head on his chest and listened to his heart thumping in my ear. I jumped in the shower then went to the boys' room to see if Mali had fallen asleep. He had. I turned off their TV, and allowed my eyes to be drawn to Catrell's bed.

*Please watch over my nephew and keep him safe, Lord. He's just a baby and he doesn't understand what's happening. Please don't allow him to think that I didn't try to fight for him or that I gave him away. I love him as if he were my own. If it's in Your will, Lord, please bring him back to me. Thank you, Lord. Good night, Catrell. I love you so much. I hope you had a fun day and not a sad one. Beyonce' has been asking for you all day. I told her that if she prays hard enough...you will be back. Your cousins send their love, and Hitta does too. I'll see you in my dreams, Baby. Sleep with the angels.*

I didn't even realize I was crying until I heard little Mali ask me if I was okay.

"I'm fine, Baby. I didn't mean to wake you up. I'll see you in the morning okay?"

"Okay," he agreed.

"I have an idea, Babe," Hitta said, coming out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. I looked at him, urging him to speak. "I'm sending you on a cruise. See if Simba will go with you. I'll pay for her too."

"That's sweet, Baby, but I'm not going anywhere. I need to be here for these kids right now. I need to be here for you. I need to be here..."

"In case Catrell comes back," he finished for me quietly. I nodded.

We had just slid beneath the cool sheets when my phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and knew immediately who it was.

"What's up, my'nig?" I answered playfully.

"Hey, LaLa! I just wanted to give you an update," Coby said.

"Go ahead. I'm all ears."

"She ain't over here where I am yet, but she'll be coming. One of my homies sent word that--"

"Who is that?" Hitta interrupted loudly. Coby fell out laughing. I sat shaking my head. "I don't give a damn about you shaking that huge-ass head, I asked you a question." Coby was no good.

"Huge-ass head?" I repeated incredulously. "Remember that."

"Not like that, Babe," he quickly backpedaled, remembering my threat from before.

"This is Coby, Baby. Simba's sister."

"Oh! My bad. Tell her what's up, and to keep her head up," he said.

"Tell him thanks," Coby said. "I can't wait to meet him." I relayed the message.

"Soon," Hitta said.

"Okay, Coby, what happened?" I asked, getting back to business before the law busted in and caught her silly ass on that phone.

"One of my homies sent word that she's kicking real bad. She's been laying down since she got here. She doesn't eat or anything, LaLa. She just stays curled up in the bed all day."

"How long before they will move her?" I asked.

"Probably a couple of days. It ain't gon' take long."

"Keep me posted."

"You know I will."

"Do you need anything?" I asked.

"Nah, I'm good, LaLa. I still have a lot of that other shit you left me. Don't trip."

"Take care, Baby."

"Love you, LaLa. Talk to you soon." We ended the call, and I immediately took time out to thank God. My situation could have been so much worse and I could still be right where Coby was.

When I awoke the next morning, I received a call from the lawyer I had contacted about Little Mali and Marshay. In an emergency hearing, she had gotten me temporary custody. She said the judge was not happy about a mother abandoning her children and then disappearing with a man, leaving them with complete strangers.

“LaLa, he put a social worker on the case. That means eventually someone will come to your home and ensure that your home is fit for children. Are you prepared for that?”

“Of course,” I assured her, as I kissed Hitta who was sitting at the kitchen table with Little Mali and Marshay. “Anytime.”

“Okay. So we’re moving ahead with permanent custody? Correct?” she asked.

“Indeed,” I said without a second thought. We agreed to meet soon and ended the call.

“Auntie LaLa, the door!” Mali yelled as if I couldn’t hear it. He sat with a piece of paper and a pencil, practicing writing his name over and over again. A forgotten bowl of cereal sat near his right arm. He picked up the paper and showed Hitta.

“That’s what I’m talking about, Bruh!” Hitta said excitedly. “You did that!”

I gave Mali a thumbs up and went to see who was invading my privacy so early in the morning. I did my usual peep, then stormed to the door. I flung it open, and forgot about the two children sitting at my table as I unleashed all the cuss words I had saved up for a special occasion.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“LaLa!” Hitta yelled, jumping up from the table. “Mali, take Marshay and go to your room!” He appeared behind me at the door.

He froze when he saw who it was.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I asked angrily. I reached out to snatch her ass in and Hitta pulled me back. “How did you get out?” I asked my bitch-ass sister Tina.

“I just came to talk to you, LaLa. I don’t want to fight.” Now how the hell was this shit possible? I had just gotten off with Coby who had said the ho was half dead in a jail cell! Now she was standing on my doorstep looking like she weighed the same as Marshay.

“Let her in, Babe,” Hitta said. “You’re not about to be giving these white people a reason to call the police.” I looked at him as if he had just lost his last sane brain cell.

“I’m not letting no damn crackhead into my house, Hitta! She’d probably come back with all her smoker homies and rob us blind! No way!”

“LaLa, please. I really need to talk to you. It’s important. Just listen to me. Please,” Tina begged with tears running down her face.

“How did you know where I live anyway?” I asked irritably, stepping to the side for her to enter. “Babe, take my purse upstairs,” I said to Hitta, and didn’t give a damn if she heard me.

"Your address is on my paperwork, from the visiting forms," she explained, following me into the kitchen. I turned to face her.

"That was some punk-ass shit you did, Tina. Punishing Catrell for telling me that you were smoking that shit."

"So you set me up with drugs? You care more about your nephew than you do your own sister?" she asked.

"Bitch, what drugs? I don't deal with drugs! I don't know what you're talking about!" I lied in case she was wearing a wire or some shit. "And *again I ask*, how did you get out of jail? Are you working for the police or something?"

"No!" she said, angrily. "I used the money Granny left me so I could post bail."

"Granny left you some money?" I asked incredulously. "I bet you just been having a smoke-a-palooza, huh?" I said and fell out laughing.

"No, I haven't! I didn't come here to be insulted by you, LaLa!"

"How did you get here? You better not have brought anybody to my home, Tina!"

"I took the bus, then took a cab," she explained.

"What do you want? I don't want you here. I will never forgive you for what you did to Catrell."

"LaLa, I'm dying," she blurted out. "I have AIDS." Tears filled her eyes and ran down her face. "They tested me at the program." I sat stunned, staring at my sister as she broke down crying. "I've known for about two months now. I tried to deal with it at first, but I couldn't. I didn't want to think about it anymore, so I started taking pills. After a few weeks, pills weren't enough anymore. I went on a day pass and spent the entire day smoking. I've been smoking ever since. I never meant to hurt Catrell, LaLa. I couldn't help it. It wasn't that I didn't care about being around my son, it's just that every time I start thinking about the life I'm going to be leaving behind, I want to be high."

"Tina, a lot of people have HIV and they live a long time. It's not a death sentence anymore," I pointed out, wiping tears from my own eyes.

"My t-cells are too low, LaLa. By the time they figured out what was wrong with me the HIV had already developed into AIDS. I take medication for it, but there is no reversing it. At last count, I only had one hundred and seventy-five t-cells left. If I do go to prison, LaLa, I'll more than likely be housed in the medical ward. But, that's only part of what I need to tell you. I did something really bad, LaLa. I know you're going to hate me for it, but I have to get it off my chest. I don't want to go to hell," she said and started crying uncontrollably. I was starting to feel so bad for what I had done to her. I felt sorry for my sister.

"Tina--"

"No, LaLa!" she interrupted. "You have to let me say this before I lose my nerve. I'm so sorry," she said, and continued to cry.

"Sorry for what? Go ahead, Tina," I urged gently.

"I...well...I was mad at you, LaLa. That's the only reason I did it. You have to believe that. And it was a really long time ago."

"Did *what*?" I asked impatiently.

"I slept with your boyfriend," she admitted quietly.

"Bitch, you fucked Hitta?" I asked. "That's a damn lie! Hitta wouldn't fuck you with somebody else's dick! You are such a fucking liar!"

"Not him, LaLa!" she said emphatically. "Jayshon!"

"Oh girl, who cares? Damn near every bitch I know has fucked Jayshon. No worries," I said.

"LaLa, I want you to get Catrell back," she said. "There is no one else I want to raise my son after I'm gone. I acted out of anger. I didn't mean to punish my baby."

"Well apparently there is, since you signed him over to his father."

"That's not his father," she said quietly. I wasn't sure I had heard her correctly.

"What do you *mean*, that's not his father?" I practically yelled.

"LaLa, do you remember when I tried to sell Catrell?" she asked with her head held down in shame.

“You didn’t *try*. You did. And Yes, I remember.”

“That dude I tried to sell him to, he wasn’t just some random man, LaLa. Jayshon arranged it all.”

“Why would he help you to sell your child? That makes no sense.”

“It was his child too,” she confessed quietly.

“What the *fuck* are you trying to tell me, Tina? Jayshon is Catrell’s father?” I asked incredulously. She nodded. “Bitch, you had me raising my ex-man’s son?” I asked, feeling like I was about to faint. “Wait. If you lied about who his father was before, who’s to say you aren’t lying now?”

“I knew you would say that, so I brought you this...” she handed me a piece of paper. I unfolded and read it. I sat looking at her in disbelief. It was a paternity test. It shamelessly revealed that Jayshon was 99.9% Catrell’s father. “I’m so sorry, LaLa. There were so many times that I wanted to tell you.”

“How did you get Jayshon to submit to a paternity test?” I asked suspiciously.

“I didn’t. Mali made him do it. When I told Jayshon that I was pregnant, the first thing he said was that it wasn’t his. He talked to me so badly. Well, I knew there was no way I could raise a baby on my own, and I was afraid to tell Granny. So, I talked to Mali about it. He didn’t believe me at first. He talked to Jayshon and at first he denied it, then he finally admitted that it was true. Mali went to talk to Granny and told her I needed her help, but, by then I had already sold the baby. I was smoking pretty bad by then, LaLa. The dude I sold Catrell to called Mali and told him. He was just going to *give* Catrell back to Mali, but you know Mali; he insisted on paying him. He took Catrell straight to Granny after that, and I wasn’t allowed to see him for a while.”

“Did Jayshon pay you with crack to fuck him or what?” I asked.

“No. He didn’t know I was smoking when that happened. I think that’s why he told me that he knew somebody that would give me some rocks if I gave them the baby; he was embarrassed and afraid that people would find out he had fucked a smoker. LaLa, Jayshon didn’t approach me, I

approached him...and he didn't know at the time that we were sisters. It was a mess, and when Zeph and Mali found out, they went ballistic. I just...can we not talk about this anymore?" she asked, wiping tears from her eyes.

"Oh no, bitch we gon' talk about it. So the man that came to pick up Catrell yesterday, has another man's son living in his house and he thinks the boy is his? And you're alright with that?"

"He never doubted me when I told him Catrell was his," she said with a little smile. "He genuinely loved me. He has never second-guessed it. I never should have cheated on him with Jayshon. I've kept the secret for years, and Mali and Zeph too."

"Fuck all that," I said simply with a wave of my hand. "What about my nephew? You have him living with a man who is *not* his fucking father, Tina. It's not fair to either of them. Not to mention you voluntarily signed over permanent custody to him, knowing good and damn well that he wasn't that boy's father. You are so damn wrong you may never be right again in life. There is no way to fix this without all the secrets coming out. Furthermore, I have no interest in being a part of any of this bullshit. But since you like secrets so much...I have two secrets for you. Let me show you what you did to Catrell," I said, and got up from the table. I started to go up the stairs, then doubled back to make sure I didn't leave anything of value. Fuck that. "Come on, Tina," I said, just in case I was forgetting something that I may have laid down and forgot about. She got up and followed me.

I stopped in front of the boys' room and looked back at her. I stepped in. Hitta had put the giant bean bag out in the middle of the floor, and had a boy under each arm as they watched a movie on the TV screen.

"Auntie LaLa!" they said joyfully.

"What's up, Babe?" Hitta asked. "You alright?" I move to the side and Tina stepped in behind me.

"Hey, Hitta," she said, staring at the trio in disbelief. "Did they just call you...*Auntie LaLa*?" she asked quietly. I ignored her.

"Mali, Marshay, this is your Auntie Tina. This is Catrell's mom. Tina, these are Mali's and Zeph's sons. Your nephews."

"Catrell!" Mali yelled happily.

"He's not back, Baby," I said sympathetically.

"Mali and Zeph don't have any kids," she whispered to me.

"Oh yes, they do. These are our nephews, and they will be living with Hitta and me. They met they're *cousin* Catrell before he was taken away.

"Hi," Tina said with a strange smile on her face. "How come nobody ever told me?"

"Girl, you got your nerve asking that question after what you just told me. You got the nerve to feel like somebody owed you an explanation for something? Please. But for the record, I just found out myself. When it rains it pours huh, Sis?" I asked sarcastically.

"They look just like them," she observed, still in awe.

"Let's go," I said, leading her out of the room.

"So, what about Catrell? Do you think you can get him?" she asked. I stopped to look at Tina like she had lost her mind.

"Tina, I'm not about to drag Catrell through all that bullshit," I informed her, keeping my voice low. "Whether you have a paternity test or not, the fact still remains that you signed over custody to a man that isn't even his father. That was some bullshit. Do you know how much time and money it would cost to get all that undone? The man thinks that's his child, Tina. We can't just go in saying 'April Fool's' and hold up the paternity test. It would be a very messy and damaging battle in court and I'm not up for that. I love Catrell with all my heart, and I do want him here with us, but I'm not going to put him through all that just to get him back. He's known this man as his father his whole little life...so to have to tell him that he has some deadbeat ass thug, that never wanted him in the first place, as his father is wrong on every level. I don't want any part of it."

"Does Jayshon know that you've been raising Catrell since Granny died?" she asked.

"I don't know what his bitch-ass knows and doesn't know! What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm just thinking that maybe we could get Jayshon to go get Catrell, since that is his son, and give him back to you," Tina said as if she had come up with the greatest idea in the world.

"Sometimes you have to know when to let sleeping dogs lie, Tina. That boy *hates* me. He will not do anything to help me, Hitta, nor you. Just let it go. If God wants Catrell with us, He will make a way. But please do *not* go to Jayshon with this shit. It will only hurt Catrell in the long run."

"Hurt him how?" she whined. "I want him here with you and Hitta, and his cousins too."

"You should have thought about that before you did that shit you did," I said angrily. "You always on some bullshit and got a scheme up your sleeve. You've been that way your whole life and you haven't changed yet, and probably won't. You don't care who you hurt with the shit you do. All you care about is yourself. I wish I would have videoed it when Catrell was picked up yesterday morning. You put him through all that, out of spite, and with a man who has absolutely no real relation to him whatsoever. Do you know what he asked me? He asked if I get a check for Catrell. He really thought I was being paid to keep my own nephew," I said, shaking my head.

"I might have mentioned something like that to him," she confessed quietly. "I just needed him to agree to take Catrell. He's so money-hungry that I knew he wouldn't pass that up." I sat looking at my sister in utter disgust.

"Tina, are you done or is there more? I really have a lot to do today," I said, wanting her the hell away from me.

"Just one more thing," she said hesitantly with her head hanging low. Tears filled her eyes as she looked up at me. She reached into her pocket, and laid my Granny's wedding ring on the table. It was the same ring she had attempted to steal from Granny on the day that Sin was killed. I looked at her in confusion.

"How did you get that? The police found that on you and gave it back to Granny! How the fuck did you end up with

it again, and you better not lie and say she gave it to you," I said threateningly.

"She didn't give it to me," she admitted, in a horrible attempt at looking shameful.

"Bitch, how'd you get it?" I demanded. "You were arrested that day and went straight to the program."

"I...well...the day Granny died...you have to understand, LaLa-"

"I'm really kind of running out of patience, Tina. So help me, if you don't start talking I'm going to drag your bony ass all through this house! Try me if you want to!"

"LaLa," she said, standing up and taking a few steps back. "I went to Granny's house the day she died."

"How? You were supposed to be on around the clock supervision," I pointed out.

"There is no such thing as around the clock supervision at that program," she confessed. "I could have day passes as long as I was back by five o'clock. I...um...can I have a glass of water please?" she asked. I huffed and puffed, but handed her a bottle of water.

"Get back to it," I ordered. She took a sip of water, and a deep breath.

"I had a fight with Granny. I showed up at her house to apologize for all that had happened. She wouldn't let me in, so I...kind of forced my way in. I tried to go to Catrell's room, just to see him, and she tried to stop me."

"What do you mean *tried*?" I asked.

"We got into a little tussle, and...well, she started saying that her chest hurt. I thought she was just saying it to distract me," she cried, wiping her eyes. "But when I realized something was really wrong, I helped her to a chair-"

"And!" I said emphatically. "Bitch, keep going!" I demanded.

"I ran," she said simply. "But before I left-"

"Before you left, you went into her room and stole the ring back," I finished for her. "You killed her."

"I didn't kill her!" she said, crying uncontrollably.

“Catrell saw you there that day. *That’s* why he made me promise not to let you take him. Bitch, you killed Granny in front of Catrell.”

“I really was going to take him with me, but he was fighting me,” she confessed, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

“So, you knew he saw you there, and you were going to take him so he couldn’t tell anyone,” I said quietly. “Like it’s not bad enough that you had just basically killed Granny right in front of him.”

“I didn’t kill her!” she repeated.

“Did you call an ambulance?” I asked. She pitifully shook her head. “Did you attempt to try to drive her to the hospital?” Again, she shook her head. “You left her there knowing good and damn well that she was having a heart attack. Even if you didn’t know exactly what was wrong, you knew something wasn’t right. You left her there to die in the house, with her three-year-old great-grandchild as the only one to try to help her. You know...she called 911. She told them that she didn’t want them to take her, but to come get Catrell out of the house. In reality, she was calling them on your ass, but she couldn’t tell them about you having been there, because by the time they got there, she was dead. You are one sick ass bitch, Tina; a sick, selfish, evil, conniving ass bitch. Get your trifling ass out of my house.” She stood to leave. “Why don’t you do us all a favor?” I asked, escorting her to the door. She turned to look at me. “Hurry up and die.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Hitta didn't ask me what had happened with Tina, and I didn't volunteer the information. I wasn't ready to talk about it, and he didn't press me. He got ready to go to his shop, and left shortly after.

With a heavy heart, I placed my grandmother's beloved ring back in the jewelry box with the rest of her jewelry that sat high on a shelf in my closet.

I packed up the boys and Beyonce', and drove to the house that my granny had left me in her will. As soon as I opened the door, the dog took off through the house, sniffing inside every room. She would never understand that the lady who had showed her so much love and special care, was no longer there. I was wondering if Beyonce' had tried to attack Tina as she pushed her way into my grandmother's home. I surely hoped so. It would serve her wicked ass right.

We went out to the backyard where weeds had overgrown my granny's garden and flowers. I would need to hire a gardener to keep the yard up, and I mentally added that to the list of things to be done so I could get the house rented out. I locked up the house and we left.

I don't know what led me to do it, but I pointed my car in the direction of the house where I had known Catrell's father to last reside. I didn't know or care if he would recognize my

car. The streets were public and I was entitled to utilize them just as well as anyone.

I didn't see any sign of life, and was almost past the house when I saw a woman come outside holding the hand of a little girl. They were Hispanic. I sadly kept going. He had relocated, and I had no idea where my nephew was living. I drove to Hitta's shop and got the boys out of the car.

"Hey, Babe," Hitta smiled, pausing to speak to me as he stood talking to the driver of a cherry red Range Rover. "I'll be right there."

"Okay," I said, taking the boys inside to see the cars that were being worked on.

"What y'all up to?" Hitta asked scooping Marshay up in his arms, and causing him to laugh.

"I need to go see Jayshon," I informed him.

"What?" Hitta asked. "Ay, Mack! Do me a favor real quick!" he said, pointing at the two kids.

"I got you!" Mack said, coming to show the boys all the cars he was so proud of. I followed Hitta into his office and sat down across from him. He sat staring at me as if I were an alien of some sort.

"What was that now?" he asked angrily. "You want to go see who?"

"I need to go see Jayshon," I repeated.

"I thought we were cool on that."

"I thought so too...until I talked to Tina this morning," I said wearily. "He's Catrell's real father," I said quietly and waited for him to react. He sat staring at me with a look on his face that was neither shock nor surprise. I moved to the edge of my chair and focused my eyes on him. He didn't flinch. Angry tears appeared in my eyes. "Why the *fuck* are you not as shocked as I was?" I demanded. "You knew??? You knew and you didn't tell me, Hitta? How could you do that to me?"

"LaLa, Mali told me everything a while back. I was with him when he went to get Catrell back after Tina gave him to dude."

"She didn't *give* Catrell away! She *sold* him!" I yelled. "You've known all this time!" I said accusingly. "How could you keep that from me?"

"I gave Mali my word. I couldn't disregard that just because I got with his sister," he explained. "Just because I can't stand the nigga J-Bone doesn't mean I wouldn't want what's best for his son. Catrell didn't sign on for any of this bullshit. If you think it's been hard for *you*, how hard do you think it's been on me? I'm helping my girl raise her ex-nigga's baby and she don't even know it. I don't keep secrets from you, LaLa, but the shit Mali had told me in confidence, is going to stay just that. You can't ask me to ever betray him, because I won't...not even for you. I love you more than anything in this world, Babe, but that was my *best* fucking friend. He wasn't only your brother, he was mine too," he said, and gave me a look that said the conversation was over.

I stood dejectedly and slung my bag over my shoulder. I was devastated, but Hitta was right. I was mad about a promise he had made years ago, and the promise wasn't void just because my brother was no longer here.

"I'm sorry, Babe," he said. "I kind of hoped you would never find that out. Mali and Zeph had told J-Bone and your sister that if it ever got back to you, it was a wrap for both of them. I'll give the nigga the benefit of the doubt and say that's why he never told you. I don't know why Tina would bring it up now though."

"She's dying. She has AIDS," I explained. "She wanted to clear her conscience."

"What?" he asked, in disbelief. I nodded. "Damn, that's fucked up."

"She wanted me to use the information to try to get Catrell back." I said sadly. "But I just can't...I can't do that to Catrell, Hitta. It's best that he never know who his father is. The only good thing out of all this is that he will never find out because his real daddy doesn't want him, and nobody else will be alive to tell him." Hitta nodded thoughtfully.

"So she feels bad now about taking him away from his real family, knowing she's about to die?" he asked quietly. I

nodded in confirmation. "You made the right decision, Babe. All that court shit will fuck him up."

"Exactly."

"But if you decide you want to do it, you know I'm with you," he said.

"I know, Baby. But, no. It can unearth too many secrets and too many things. Jayshon is his biological father, and could easily get Catrell and send him to live with a bunch of damn strangers. He's better off with the only man he's known as his father. If he can't be with us, then I'd rather he be there than anywhere else."

"Okay, Babe," he nodded in agreement.

"Tina killed my granny," I said quietly and lost all composure. I was crying so hard that I lost my breath and started gasping for air.

"LaLa, calm down, Babe!" He handed me a bottle of cold water. Instead of drinking it, I pressed the cold bottle to my forehead. "Now, what the hell did you just say?" Hitta asked, leaning forward to hear me better. I repeated what I said, and told him the story about Tina being at my granny's house the day she died. Hitta sat staring at me in disbelief.

"Damn, Babe. I feel so damn bad for you. It seems like you can't win for losing. It's one bad thing after another," he said sympathetically. He came around the desk and squatted in front of me. "You need to get away for a while, LaLa. No boys, no me, nothing. Just you, by yourself."

"I'm not going anywhere without you," I clarified. "So you can forget that one."

"Just for a few days?" he asked.

"No," I said with finality. "I can't run from my life, Hitta. It's the only one I'm going to get; and when I get to heaven and God asks me what I did with this life He gave me, I can't tell him that I spent it avoiding every obstacle that came my way. I want to be able to say that I did my very best to face each roadblock head on. Maybe I didn't always come out on top...but I tried."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Dinner was done and I was sitting on the couch with my laptop as the boys played with Jay-Z on the living room floor. Hitta sat next to me, reading about the top ten cars in the world. He looked up at me as my phone rang.

"Hello?" I answered skeptically, not recognizing the number.

"LaLa? This is Tamiko. I'm not sure if you remember who I am, but-"

"I know exactly who you are," I interrupted. Hitta looked up at me. "What can I do for you, Tamiko?" I said, using her name so Hitta would know who I was speaking to. He set down the magazine he was reading, and zeroed in on my half of the conversation.

"I was wondering if maybe I could talk to you. Do you think you could meet me somewhere?" she asked hesitantly.

"Sure," I agreed. Hitta looked at me strangely. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes, that would be great," she said.

"I'll come to you," I volunteered. "Ten o'clock at the Roscoe's on Manchester.

"Okay. Thanks, LaLa."

"No problem."

"Um...how are my nephews?" she asked.

"*Our* nephews are fine," I said. "See you tomorrow."

"What the fuck does she want?" Hitta asked, keeping his voice low. "Now don't get me wrong, Babe. I'm grateful that she didn't send your ass up the river, but how can she be alright with this hook-up?" he inquired, indicating the boys. "What kind of woman is she?"

"The same kind as her sister apparently," I said simply.

We got the kids to bed, with Hitta telling them one of his famous made-up stories. Mali wanted to hear the story over again.

"One story per night," Hitta said as if he were a star who was leaving the stage after blessing the audience with one of his hit songs.

"Sleep with us!" Mali pleaded, pulling on Hitta's hand. "Come on!"

"I can't do that one, Bruh. You want your Auntie LaLa to sleep in there all by herself? She'll be scared, man."

"No, she won't," Mali giggled. "She's tough!"

"She is!" Hitta agreed. "But you have Marshay in here. Auntie LaLa likes to have company too. It's no fun being all by yourself."

"Okay," he said dejectedly. "Auntie LaLa, you sleep in Catrell's bed then."

"Not tonight, Sweetie. Maybe soon we will all camp out in my room okay?"

"Cool! When?" Mali asked.

"I'll tell you tomorrow," I laughed.

"Good night then!" he said, wanting me to hurry up and get out of his room so he could hurry up and go to sleep. Hitta and I went to our own room.

"Is that your phone, Babe?" Hitta asked, indicating our phones sitting side by side on the dresser. I got up to check.

"Hey, Talia!" I said happily to a mutual friend of Simba's and mine.

"What's up, LaLa? Damn, it's been a while. I haven't talked to you since that barbecue we had at the park almost a year ago. How have you been?"

"I have no complaints," I said simply, not ever one to put people in my business.

"That's right. I'm having a champagne brunch at my house tomorrow. Do you think you can make it?" she asked hopefully.

"Do you still live in the same place?"

"No, girl I moved from over there. I couldn't do it anymore. Me and my baby's father got this place a couple of weeks ago. He's been having a few problems with a couple of the dudes over here but they ain't running shit. We ain't running from nobody. If they don't want us over here, too damn bad for them," she said.

"DM me the addy. I'll be there."

"You'll be *where*?" Hitta asked. I held up my hand. *Damn, can a sista end her phone call before you start the interrogation?*

"Okay, I will. I can't wait to see you, LaLa! Simba will be here too," she informed me.

"I'll probably see if she wants to ride with me then," I said.

"I'll see y'all tomorrow, Girl."

"Will there be any kids there?" I asked, thinking I would take the boys so Hitta could have a break.

"Girl, you know there will. My kids will be here, and I'm sure there will be others."

"Okay. Just checking. I'll let you know when I'm on my way," I said.

"Where does she live?" Hitta asked as soon as I ended the call.

"Right off Florence and Broadway," I informed him and waited for him to stop going off.

"You might as well call her ass back and tell her you won't be there. Ain't no way in hell you're going over there, LaLa."

"I'll be fine," I said with a wave of my hand.

"Oh, I know you will. 'Cause you ain't going," he said with finality and angrily fluffed his pillow. "Nothing more to talk about." He turned over in the bed with his back to me, still mumbling about how I must be crazy if I think I'm going anywhere near there.

*Last time I checked, I was grown and did what the fuck I wanted to do. I didn't need anyone's permission.* I sat up in the bed, mad-dogging his back, wanting to pursue the argument but deciding against it.

"You gon' just sit up and stare at me all night, LaLa?" he suddenly asked, causing me to jump. Now that pissed me off!

"Ain't nobody looking at you boy! Don't flatter yourself!" I said and jumped up from the bed. I stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door. I sat on the edge of the tub with my legs and arms crossed, swinging my leg angrily back and forth. When I had given him enough time to fall asleep, I walked out and climbed back in the bed. I flipped and flopped as hard as I could, then put my cold feet up against his legs. I heard him start laughing, and that sent me over the edge. I was livid!

"You're funny, Babe," he laughed. "You're mad because I'm trying to keep your hard-headed ass safe? Fine, go then. Do what you want to do."

"I was going to do that anyway!" I informed him.

"Oh you were?" he asked, turning over to face me.

"Hell yes, I was! If I needed someone to run my life I would definitely consider you for the job, but I think I pretty much got it covered!"

"Shut your dramatic ass up, LaLa" he said wearily. "You're so used to fucking with these bitch-boys that don't give a damn about your ass, that you don't even know when a nigga is trying to look out for you. Hell, I don't even like going in that area, so why would I be okay with you going?" he asked.

"You don't have to be okay with it, Hitta. If I get shot and killed I know how to dial 911!" I said. He fell out laughing. I narrowed my eyes until they were mere slits.

"Girl, you are hilarious! Dead folks don't dial 911! That shit was too funny! You want me to text you the number to 911?" he asked and continued to laugh at his own joke. I didn't see a damn thing funny and it showed on my face. "Well, have fun, Babe. I'm going to sleep. Good night."

I barely slept, and got out of bed long before Hitta. When I walked down the stairs, Beyonce' sped past me and sat by the front door. I put her leash on her and stepped outside in my pajamas. The sun was just coming up. She did her business, then demanded to be taken back inside to the comfort of her castle.

I sat on the couch watching the news, and updating myself on the happenings around me. The city of Angels was off the hook as always, and I was positively sure that it wouldn't calm down just because I was going to be there.

I had finished washing a load of clothes, made breakfast, then set the table.

"Auntie LaLa," Marshay said, climbing up into a chair at the table. He was dressed in a pair of blue jeans, a gray Jordan shirt and a pair of gray Jordan's. Hitta must be up. I quickly busied myself as I talked to him.

"Hey, Baby! What's going on?" I said to Marshay.

"The park today!" he yelled excitedly and threw his arms in the air like he just didn't care. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Auntie LaLa!" Little Mali said, seemingly appearing from nowhere. "Can I see a picture of my dad?" I froze at the question. He had never inquired about Mali, and as far as I knew, his ho-ass mama had never mentioned my brother to the boy.

"Well, sure, Mali. Let me find some for you, okay?"

"Okay," he smiled.

"Where did you hear about Mali?" I asked curiously.

"Me?"

"Yes, you, Hun. Where did you hear about Mali?"

"Mali?" he repeated. "That's me."

It dawned on me at that moment that he had no idea that his father's name was Mali. I shook my head in disgust.

"Mali is also your father's name," I smiled. "My brother's nickname was Mali. His real name was Malachi too. That's why we call you 'Little Mali'," I explained. "You're named after your father."

"Where is he?" he asked. "Can I see him?"

"He's in heaven," I said, trying not to sound like I felt. "But your godfather, Hitta, was his best friend, and he'll take just as good care of you as Mali would have himself. They were like brothers, like you and Marshay."

"Really?" he asked in awe. "Like me and Marshay?"

"Yep, like you and Marshay. I'm sorry you never got to meet my brother. He was a good man," I said.

"He has wings. Hitta told me," he said like a mini-lawyer presenting his case to a jury.

"I guess by now he does," I smiled.

"Does heaven have a zoo?" he asked.

"Heaven has everything!" I said excitedly.

"Does my daddy like the zoo?"

"Your daddy *loves* the zoo! I bet he goes to see the animals all the time! But not just the ones in the zoo, probably the ones on the ark too!"

"The ark!" he yelled ecstatically. "Like in the bible story you told me!"

"Exactly!" I agreed.

"Auntie LaLa," he began sadly. "I want to go to heaven too." I nearly dropped the plates I was holding.

"You have to wait until God is ready for you to go, Mali. You can't just go when you're ready. He makes the decision," I explained as gently as I could. I guess my explanation didn't go over very well because he burst into tears as if I told him the tooth fairy had stolen his teeth but hadn't left any money.

"I want to go *now*," he cried.

"Where do you want to go?" Hitta asked, taking a seat next to Mali, who was furious about not being able to make his own decision about when he should grace heaven with his presence.

"Heaven!" Marshay said, sending eggs flying across the table.

"Hey, no talking with your mouth full," I said. "They don't want your chewed up eggs," I frowned, sending him into a giggling fit. Mali scowled at him, wondering how Marshay could be laughing at such a troublesome time.

“What time are you leaving?” Hitta asked me, after he got Mali to calm down.

“Around nine,” I said.

“Leave the boys with me, LaLa. I don’t think you should take them.”

“There will be other kids there, Hitta,” I explained reasonably.

“I’m not tripping off other kids, I’m tripping off them. Besides, you have to make a stop first, and I don’t think they should be there. Leave them with me,” he said in a voice that let me know there was no room for argument. Little Mali and Marshay sat looking back and forth between Hitta and me like they were watching a tennis match.

I was showered, dressed, and looking as fly as a real queen should when Simba called me.

“What time are you picking me up?” she asked.

“I’ll be there by twelve,” I promised.

“Okay. I’ll be ready.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“U m...hi, LaLa,” Tamiko said.  
“Hi,” I said, taking a seat across from her. She looked good, and I noted that she was almost as fly as myself...almost.

“I know you’re wondering why I asked you to meet me,” she began. I nodded. “Well, I was hoping that maybe...I mean, I know you write books and stuff...I’m not quite sure of how to say this without sounding like a money hungry bitch, but...”

“You just said it; and yes you do sound like a money hungry bitch. You want money for retracting your statement,” I said in disgust. “Very tactless. Please don’t call me again. I don’t have time to play games with you bitches,” I said, rising to my feet so I could get as far away from the leech as possible.

“If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be sitting in jail,” she reminded me.

“Bitch, if it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have been there in the first place. I don’t think that’s information that you would want leaked.”

“So you’re blackmailing me?” she asked incredulously.

“Never. I’m *informing* you; and if you don’t want me to *inform* the rest of the world, you’ll stay in your own muthafucking lane.” I was livid as I stormed out of the restaurant. The nerve of that fruit fly looking ho, trying to get a sista’s hard earned money.

I turned and went back inside, stomping back up to her table. "Ya' know, bitch, you got a lot of damn nerve wanting money from me when you know I have your sister's kids to take care of. You're a pitiful ass, greedy, miserable ho. You're sitting here in Gucci everything, talking about you need money...if you really need money, sell that five-hundred-dollar weave in your head. You and your trashy ass, dysfunctional ass family hasn't even tried to offer up a dollar to go towards the care of those boys!" I said angrily.

"You ain't right!" A dude at the next table said to her. "Ain't even checked on them kids!" If I wasn't so mad, I would have been hollering laughing.

"Look, LaLa," she attempted to interject.

"She don't want to hear that bullshit!" interrupted the man who was so in tune with our conversation that he had forgotten about his food. "You just ain't shit!"

"Excuse you!" Tamiko yelled, turning to look at him. "LaLa," she began again.

"Hush ho. Don't even...y'all don't even fucking *call* to see how they're doing, or if they need anything, or if they might be sick, or hurt, or missing their mom! But you had enough fuckin' nerve to come up in here and *try* to act shy about asking me for some money. I have three things to say to you, Tamiko and then you're dismissed."

"What's that?" she asked, clearly embarrassed with a fake smile on her face as she looked around to see if anyone was listening. Hands with chicken legs in them had stopped mid-bite as they shook their heads

"Fuck you, fuck yourself, fuck everything you think you stand for," I said loudly and clearly before making my exit.

"That part!" the dude yelled in her ear as he turned to wave at me. I hated to make a scene in public but sometimes I found that women like her were an embarrassment in themselves. They needed to be put on blast every now and then. Before I pulled out of the parking lot, I saw her exit Roscoe's and get into a convertible black Mercedes. I shook my head in disgust, and headed to pick up Simba.

"Simba, I just don't know about this," I said, eyeing the area and the dudes hanging out in front of the apartments next door to Talia's house. "I'm kind of having second thoughts," I admitted.

"Girl, they do look a little rough. But fuck that, we're here now. We'll be fine. They ain't thinking about us," she said, as she stepped out of the car in a pair of cream colored shorts and a gold top. Her gold bling sandals glistened in the sunlight, warning everyone within a hundred feet to put their stunna shades on. I stepped out and quickly set my alarm before anyone could think about diving into the driver's seat and speeding off with my Charger.

I wore a pair of light blue jeans, a Kelly green top, and a pair of suede Kelly green open toe boots with a four-inch wedge heel. Couldn't a soul debate with me about how fly I was. I just hoped I wouldn't have to put my heels into motion and do any unnecessary running. I held tight to my green suede Michael Kors bag, hugging it like it was a long lost boyfriend who had just come to town.

"Ay, can I holla at you for a minute?" one of the dudes yelled. I kept walking at top speed, knowing he couldn't possibly be talking to me. Simba could stop if she wanted to, but I wasn't about to stop with her. "I'm talking to you, in the green!" he said. I shook my head no and kept up with my power walk. He jogged over and blocked my path. I was livid. "How you doin'?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks. I'm kind of in a hurry though," I answered. Simba walked around me and proceeded into the gate.

"Come on, Girl!" Simba said. "We're already late!" I would have to remember to thank her later for coming to my rescue.

"Take care," I said and stepped around the dude. I walked in behind Simba and closed the gate behind me.

"Ugh," Simba said. "I know good and damn well he didn't think anybody was about to stand there and entertain his curb-serving ass. Looking like a damn beetle." I was no good as Talia came and opened the door. I was cracking up laughing.

“What’s wrong with LaLa’s silly ass?” Talia smiled. “Come on in y’all. Long time no see!” she said happily, hugging us both. “Did those dudes out there give y’all a hard time?”

“Nah,” we both said. They both looked at me as my phone gave off a muffled song. I dug around in my bag until I found it.

“Hey, Baby,” I answered.

“You make it there yet?” Hitta asked.

“Yes, we just got here.”

“Alright,” he said. “Just checking on you. Call me when you get ready to leave there.”

“I will. Love you.”

“Yeah, love you too,” he said. I was debating if I should inform him of the fact that I didn’t like his tone when he ended the call.

“For y’all that don’t know them, this is LaLa and Simba,” Talia said. The women seated around the table smiled and waved; except two of them, who exchanged a nasty look and rolled their eyes. I looked at Simba to see if she had caught it. Of course she had. We had a silent eye-conversation, with me giving her a look that said I didn’t really want to have to show out up in there, but I would if need be. She gave me a slight nod to let me know that she was in agreeance. Talia disappeared into the kitchen and came out with two Mimosas. She handed one to me and one to Simba.

“LaLa! What’s been up, Boo?” asked Talia’s sister Tamia as she came out of the kitchen. She held a Mimosa in one hand, and a plate in the other. She set the plate and glass down on the table, then came and hugged me. “These hoes ain’t shit. I can’t stand these bitches,” she whispered in my ear. She hugged Simba, then slapped two name tags on our chests. She then went back over to the table and sat down. Talia and Tamia were fraternal twins. They looked similar, but had very different features. Talia was a caramel colored cutie with brown eyes, and reddish brown hair. Tamia was a smooth-skinned chocolate star with jet black hair, light brown eyes, and deep dimples.

"Tamia," Talia called. "You're eating already?" she asked in exasperation.

"Ain't this a brunch?" Tamia countered. "Bitch, I'm brunching," she said simply, and continued to eat her food. "Hell, I've been cooking for hours. A bitch is hungry." One of the women who had given Simba and me the stank-face whispered something to her friend and they fell out laughing. "Bitch, you got something you want to say?" Tamia asked. The woman just sat there staring at her with her lip turned up in disgust. "Girl, you don't want it, in them DD's Discount shoes and that Falla's sundress. You should have got them feet done before you rolled up in here thinking you're all that." The woman looked utterly embarrassed. "Clap back so I can eat your ass up."

"Tamia, really?" Talia asked angrily.

"Fuck these bitches. They don't even like you," Tamia said. "They just want some free food. Outside of LaLa and Simba, I ain't ever laid eyes on any of these hoes."

"Simba, LaLa, y'all hungry?" Tamia asked, picking up a croissant with her perfectly manicured hands.

"This isn't your party!" Talia said in frustration. "It's not time to eat yet!"

"Says you," Tamia countered with a wave of her hand. "Your ass ain't hungry because you ate while I was cooking. What kind of host are you? You're full, but your guests have to be hungry until you're ready to eat again. Girl, bye!"

Simba and I sat side by side at the table, listening to the lies and fantasies of the side chicks and ballers' wives who thought they were really something to be envious of. Simba tapped me under the table as one of the women started talking about her kids' father, who had promised to buy her a Benz, but came home with an Infinity instead. She pretended to be upset, but we could tell she was happy as hell with the car she had gotten. Her nametag read that her name was Londa. She was a pretty woman with obvious goals of being a hood star.

"Girl, I'm trying to get that Jag though," said Carema, the one that had looked at us crazy when we walked in. She had gotten over her cussing out from Tamia and was back in the

game. "Carl said I could have one for my birthday. He better come through. I'm sick of sexing his old ass and not getting what I want in return. That man is sixty-five years old and making six figures a year. He be buying me that bullshit. I can get my own nails and hair done. That's that ratchet shit; some weave and some punk-ass trinkets. I mean, Mack makes good money at the car shop, but he ain't supplying me with all I need financially. He ain't buying no Jag's and Benz's but he's doing alright I guess, with his boring ass." Simba was tearing my leg up under the table, as we both sat with fake smiles on our faces. "I can't stand no weak ass nigga anyway. Mack act like he ain't 'bout that life anymore. He don't want to go to no parties or nothing. All he wants to do is work and go home, eat and watch TV until bed time," she said, shaking her head in disgust. "He don't even be putting it down on a bitch like he used to."

"Mack is cool," said an older woman named Jackie. "Give him a break. He's trying to do shit legally now. He's a good man and if you don't appreciate him, somebody else will." She and the woman sitting next to her slapped a high five.

"He's alright," said Mack's woman Carema, with a dismissive wave of her hand. "He ain't going nowhere."

"Why do you cheat on him if you don't want him to go anywhere?" asked a woman who had been sitting quietly up until then.

"Girl, Lena, don't even get her started! She doesn't even know why she treats Mack like that," Talia said, with a roll of her eyes.

"Nah," Lena said. "I really want to know. It seems like y'all get these good dudes and y'all ain't happy unless they're going upside your head, or fucking your best friend in your bed. You don't want him, but you don't want nobody else to have him. That's not right."

"You don't even know me, *Lena*, or whatever your name is!" Carema yelled. "You all up in my business!"

"You put your business out there though. It'll serve your ratchet ass right if he leaves you for a real one. I'm done with it," Lena said, with a smile on her face. Carema was fuming.

Her friend sat next to her attempting to comfort her and calm her down. Simba and I exchanged a look.

So Mack had lied about having a woman. He and Simba were getting to know each other and talking on the phone all the time. They had even been out to lunch a couple of times. I was wondering if I blamed him for not claiming this hood rat when I had to snap back to reality because Talia was calling my name. I got up and walked into the kitchen with Simba behind me.

“Y’all, why do fuckin’ Tamia always have to mess up everything?” Talia asked angrily, attempting to keep her voice low. “I am so mad at her. Y’all two and Lena are the only ones here that she’s okay with. She done insulted every last one of these bitches up in here. I don’t know what to do with her! I just wanted to apologize to y’all though for Carema and Lameah. I don’t know Lameah that well, but I have known Carema for a while. I’ll tell her about herself later. Most of us here know her so we don’t really trip, but she can’t be treating my friends like that.”

“Don’t even trip, Talia,” I said. “It’s nothing we don’t get all the time. Haters gon’ hate, Hun.” We all went back to the dining room and took our seats back at the table. Tamia rolled her eyes at Talia as she passed by.

“Girl, please,” a woman named Bianca was saying. “I would eat him alive. No salt, no pepper, no hot sauce. Now *that* is a man.” She sat fanning her face with her hand as if she was getting a little overheated. “Word on the street is that he has some bitch he keeps hidden in another city. She must look like hell for him to keep her a secret,” she laughed. “His fine ass probably has a bitch in every city.”

“He ain’t even like that,” said Carema. “He and Mack are friends. The nigga money is long too. But he ain’t the type to have no bunch of bitches. He does have a girl though. I ain’t ever seen her and I’m down there *all* the time. I think Mack has met her before.”

“All I’m saying is that the nigga is set. He’s fine, he’s got money, and he’s got his own business. But his bitch is

stupid. I wouldn't be with no nigga who is embarrassed to bring me around. I need to be shown off *all* the time," Bianca said.

"I agree," Carema seconded.

"Who y'all talking about?" Talia asked, sipping her drink.

"This nigga named Hitta that works with Mack," Carema said. I gave Talia a look that said to keep quiet and not give me up. Simba didn't need to be told. "Bianca is all gaga over the nigga, but apparently he has a bitch somewhere hidden away. Probably some hunchback bitch with a house full of kids and ten different baby daddies," she laughed. "I'm saying though, I'm at that shop like every day, and I ain't ever seen the ho. She don't come through and check on the nigga, and he ain't made no effort to bring her around. You know them ugly bitches be the most loyal," she informed us haughtily.

"Maybe he feels she's just too fly to bring around some basic ass bitches. He's probably afraid the ratchetness will rub off on her," I said, focusing my eyes on Carema as I spoke. "You know what happens when a pretty bitch starts coming around ugly bitches, they get to feeling all self-conscious and insecure and shit," I laughed. "Kind of like when me and Simba walked in here."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Wasn't nobody tripping off y'all!" she argued. "Are you trying to call us ugly?"

"I'm not *trying* to do a damn thing. And bitch yes, I'm calling your punk-ass ugly. Ain't shit cute about you with that exhausted ass weave that looks like you walked here through a windstorm. Every time you open your mouth you sound like a jealous-ass hater. Newsflash ho, I'm the hunchback bitch that Hitta keeps locked away from the eyes of the world so I don't blind everybody with my ugliness," I informed her with my most beautiful smile. I flipped my hair over my shoulder and looked at Simba, then Talia. They both nodded in confirmation.

"No disrespect," Bianca interjected. "I saw him at the car shop before when Carema recommended Mack to do some work on my car. So if you can hear me around the foot in my mouth, I apologize."

"No problem," I said. "You had no idea I was his girl or that I would be this fine." Tamia fell out laughing. "But *you*," I returned my attention to Carema, "Are ugly inside and out. Mack is a sweetheart and he deserves way better than you. So, for the record, you might want to stop being so cocky about his not going anywhere, because like Lena said earlier, if you don't appreciate him, someone else will. Oh, and I'm always at that shop, Boo. I've been in and out of there since my brother Mali first opened it, and I haven't ever seen *you* there. So maybe it's not *my* man who's keeping his girl away from people because he's embarrassed. I've been knowing Mack for a few years and we have had numerous conversations; he hasn't *ever* mentioned you."

"Aww damn!" Tamia commented. "Mali was my nigga! He hooked my Benz up with that blackberry paint job though! You could see my shit blinging from a block away! Now Mali was a good ass dude. Rest in peace..." Tamia said emotionally. Carema rolled her eyes.

"What the hell warranted that eye-roll?" I asked. "Bitch, you got a problem with my brother or something? You're lucky this is my folks place or I'd dog-walk your ass all up and through here. I don't know what your problem is, and you probably don't know either with your miserable and angry ass, but don't let the flyness fool you. I don't play about my fam, Hun."

"Girl, ain't nobody even tripping off Mali!" she yelled. She had that look of a woman scorned, with the anger of a woman rejected.

"Oh, I get it. You tried to get at my brother and he embarrassed your ass huh?" I laughed. "Mali was like that; especially being that he and Mack were friends. I can just imagine what he said to you! My brother can make a bitch feel lower than I can, and I'm pretty damn good."

"Ain't nobody tried to get at Mali!" she argued in embarrassment and anger.

"This whole conversation is wrinkling my outfit. You know who I am now, and I know who you are. Let's leave it at that," I suggested.

"I don't care who you are," she said. "You don't know me or my man."

"I don't know you nor do I care to. You aren't even the type of person I would want to get to know. You don't have shit going for yourself but bad-mouthing your man to people you half-way know, and playing some old ass senior citizen out of his retirement check. You're a pitiful excuse for a woman. Get your own. What you better be doing is hoping I don't let Mack know about your little sex-games with Paw-Paw. If I were you, I'd try to be a little nicer," I suggested.

"You can tell Mack whatever the fuck you want to tell him. I'm about done with him anyway!" she said.

"Good. Because I have someone I'd like to hook him up with that will treat him way better than you do. We'll see about that 'he ain't going nowhere' shit," I laughed.

"How the fuck you gon' sit here and say you'd hook my man up with another bitch? That's some stupid shit!" she yelled, standing up from the table.

"Who are you yelling at? Bitch, you better calm down before I choke your ass with that Dollar Tree necklace you have on," I warned quietly.

"Okay, let's eat!" Talia suggested. Everybody got up to go get their food. I sat at the table glaring at Carema who was still sitting on the other side.

"You can stop trying to beef with me," she said. "I didn't know you were Hitta's girlfriend."

"I don't give a fuck about that. My position is solidified. You can say whatever you want about me. You don't mean shit to me; hell you don't even mean shit to yourself. All I'm saying is keep all that bullshit to yourself. Talia is my friend, and all this bullshit at her party is pissing me off. You need to learn to keep your mouth shut about shit you don't know anything about," I said. "You could really piss somebody off."

"I don't give a fuck about pissing nobody off! You bitches don't mean shit to me! I say what the fuck I want to say and not you or anybody else is gonna tell me otherwise! Fuck you, your man, and your dead ass brother!" she exclaimed. Before I could even talk myself out of it, I dove across the table

and landed on top of her as her chair toppled over. I took her back to my high school days when I was serving bitches these hands on the daily because they always had some bullshit to say to me. I didn't care that she said fuck me, but the bitch had said fuck my man *and* my brother who was resting peacefully in heaven. In my mind, his ears had perked up when he heard the words.

"Bitch, are you done?" I asked. "You got anything else you want to say?" I stood over her to see if she would like to speak or forever hold her peace. She apparently chose the latter. I put out my hand to help her up. At first I thought she wasn't going to take it, but then she reached out and grabbed it. I pulled her up off the floor, went back around the table to sit back down, crossed my legs, and sipped my drink. She sat dabbing her mouth with a napkin, then pulled out a compact mirror to examine her eye.

"What the fuck happened to you?" Tamia laughed as she re-entered the room. "Got that ass tapped huh, Ma? Damn, LaLa," she continued to laugh. "Your ass still don't play no games!"

"We're cool," I said simply. I got up and went to the kitchen. I was starving.

"I have your plate, LaLa," Simba informed me. We walked back out to the kitchen.

"What the fuck?" Simba mumbled when she laid eyes on Carema." Hitta is never going to let you go anywhere with me again! Every time you and I get together you have a fight!"

"You didn't have to do all that," Lameah said to me from across the table.

"I didn't have to, but I did. And bitch if you don't want it you'll shut the fuck up. Your simple ass can get it too!" I informed her.

"You sure can!" Simba said. "Keep hanging with this big mouth bitch and she gon' end up getting you killed. You shouldn't even want to be around no messy ho like her!"

"LaLa, what happened?" Talia asked when she finally came back in from the kitchen. "Tell me you didn't do that."

"I didn't do that," I lied.

"Don't lie!" Talia said.

"You told me to say I didn't do it," I reminded her.

"You did say that, Talia," Tamia said.

"Girl, shut up!" she yelled at Tamia. "She know good and well her ass ain't supposed to be doing no fighting. The nigga barely let her come!" Talia pouted.

"I'm sorry for fighting in your house, Talia," I said.

"I'm not tripping off the house, LaLa. You know I know you better than that. You don't do shit for no reason. So what happened?" she asked, glaring at Carema who wouldn't answer. She looked at Talia and rolled her eyes.

"That ass still ain't learned shit, huh?" Tamia asked.

"She said fuck my dead brother," I explained. I heard gasps from around the room. "I'm not letting anyone get away with that one," I informed Talia. "But I do apologize to you again, Talia."

"You're a disrespectful ass bitch," Tamia said, glaring at Carema. "How you just gon' say fuck her dead brother though? He was real cool with me and my sister. You ain't right."

"Why don't you mind your own business?" Carema asked, trying to speak through her swollen and bloody lips. Her eye would surely be black tomorrow.

"That's just why you're sitting there looking like you been packed out by twenty niggas, dumb ass!" Tamia snapped.

"Let's go," Carema said to her friend. "This is some bullshit." They didn't say bye or anything to anyone. Just walked out.

I sat quietly and thoughtfully eating my food, laughing occasionally at something someone said. I set my fork down. I suddenly got a bad feeling that I couldn't explain.

"I'm going to go ahead and go, Talia. I'll call you soon, okay? Simba, are you ready?" I asked.

"Yeah. Love you, Talia. Love you Tamia," Simba said. We said our goodbyes to all the women, and Talia walked us to the door.

"Sorry, LaLa. I mean, we all know Carema is a bitch but I never thought she would act like that."

La Donna Robinson

"It's okay," I assured her. We both hugged her then headed out the door.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“That was an interesting adventure,” I said as we walked out to my car.

“I can’t believe them two bitches,” she said, referring to Carema and her friend Lameah. “But you still have to explain it to Hitta before someone else does. You know she’s going to run home and tell Mack what happened.”

“Knowing him, he’ll probably say that’s what she gets,” I laughed. “Mack loved Mali. That was his homeboy and friend. She never should have said fuck my brother.” I was digging in my purse for some gum, and thinking how I would take my time driving home so I could figure out the best way to bring it up to Hitta.

“Get the fuck out the car!” We both looked up as two men in black hoodies approached on each side. “Get out the car!” He had a gun pointed at me through the window, and the one on the passenger’s side had a gun pointed at Simba. However, my car windows were tinted and I knew he couldn’t see my hand through the window. I felt the cold steel sitting at the bottom of my purse, and wrapped my hand around it. “Don’t make me tell you bitches again! I’ll blow yo’ fuckin’ head off!” he roared. He didn’t seem to be in the mood to play any games, and I wasn’t in the mood to die. There was no way I would win a shootout with two dudes. One...maybe, but definitely not two. “And leave them purses in the car too!” he ordered. That’s

when I knew they had been watching Simba and me, probably from the time we left Talia's front door. Fuck! I opened the door and started to step out, when a police car turned the corner, slowly driving down the street. The dudes quickly stuck the guns into the front pockets of their hoodies, and started in the other direction.

I took advantage of that split second, and started my car. I quickly pulled away from the curb and pulled out behind the police car. I made a right at the corner and headed toward Simba's house. We were finally able to let out a sigh of relief. We were both shook as I pulled up at her house and parked the car.

"You gon' be okay, LaLa?" she asked. "I know that just fucked you up; especially after what happened last time.

"I'm okay, Simba," I lied. I was further from *okay* than I had ever been in my life. "I just need to call Talia and let her know what happened so when the other women come out of her house, they will know to pay attention," I explained, pulling out my phone.

"Hey, LaLa," Talia answered.

"Girl, some dudes tried to carjack us outside your house. Tell everybody to be careful when they leave," I advised.

"What?" she exclaimed. "Are you serious?"

"Yep. The police came around the corner. That's the only thing that saved us. Be careful over there, Talia." I ended the call and waited for Simba to let herself into her house. She waved when she unlocked the door and stepped inside. I turned around and anxiously counted the minutes until I would be back in Pomona. I wanted to be as far away from LA as possible.

"Baby, are you at home?" I asked, when Hitta answered his phone.

"I'm at my mom's," he informed me. "Come over here."

"I want to go home. I'll see you when you get there," I said.

"What happened?" he asked. His voice sounded like Darth Vader through my speaker system.

"I uh...I'll talk to you when you get home."

"I'm on my way," he said. "Where are you?"

"Getting on the freeway."

"I'll be right behind you, Babe. You okay?" he asked in concern.

"I guess. I'll see you in a minute." I ended the call and focused on not being a statistic on the freeway. It seemed as if everyone was in a rush to get nowhere, myself included. My shaking hands were finally starting to calm down, and my heart rate was returning to normal.

I silently thanked God for sending that cop car around the corner. As much as I couldn't half-way stand their asses, they very well may have just saved the lives of Simba and myself.

I turned on some music to further calm my nerves. I should have listened to Hitta and not gone in the first place. I was sure he would remind me of the time a few years back when I was beaten, robbed, and car jacked. I again thanked God for not allowing that past tragedy to be repeated.

I dejectedly got off at my exit, and shortly after, turned into my driveway. I let myself into the house and headed straight for my room. I took the gun out of my purse and put it back in my secret hiding place. I threw myself onto my bed and lay there sulking in anger and self-pity. Who the fuck did those dudes think they were anyway? What ever happened to trying to get a job to *pay* for what you wanted? Surely they would run up on the wrong ones someday.

If only there was a way to go back in time and change some things. I would bring back my Granny and Mali. I would kill Zeph all over again, but probably get a few more shots in so he could suffer more. I would bring Catrell back, but he would never have gone to see Tina. I would even bring Sin back, but only so I could dismiss her from my life after telling her how I felt about all the bullshit she did to me. But life has no do-over button so things were what they were.

I heard the front door open and close and knew the shit was about to hit the proverbial fan. I heard Little Mali and Marshay running to their room, and Hitta's footsteps as he came to ours.

"You beat up Mack's girlfriend?" he asked, as soon as he stepped into the room. "He called me a few minutes ago and said she came home all beat up. He said he asked her what happened, and she said you just flipped out on her. Now I know that shit ain't true, so what really happened? Is that what you wanted to go so bad for? Did you know you were going to fight her before you even went?"

"Fuck that bitch. She better hope I don't beat her ass every time I see her," I said simply. "She's a disrespectful ass tramp and I don't like her."

"That's not telling me what I want to know, LaLa. Disrespectful *how*?" he inquired.

"She said fuck you."

"You got mad because she said 'fuck you'?" he asked incredulously. "Babe, that's not anything for you to be fighting over. So what if she said fuck you?"

"No, she said fuck *you*," I clarified, pointing at him. "I wouldn't give a damn about no bitch saying fuck me."

"Okay, so she said fuck 'me'. That's worth you fighting over?"

"Yep. Because she didn't just say fuck you," I said, with tears coming to my eyes.

"Babe, what else did she say? It had to be pretty bad for you to jump on her, and for you to be getting so upset about it now. What else did she say?" he repeated, sitting next to me on the bed.

"She said..."

"Go ahead, Babe," he urged.

"She said fuck my dead brother," I explained. "I just lost it after that. I had been trying to hold my composure for the longest."

"Fuck your dead brother?" he asked in disbelief. "Did you get her good, Babe?" he asked. I nodded.

"*Really good*," I assured him.

"She didn't tell Mack that part. He probably would have knocked the shit out of her ass. But that was some pretty deep shit to say to somebody, especially somebody you don't even know. How did all that come about?" he asked.

I told him how it all started, and how they thought Hitta kept me hidden away from society to spare himself the embarrassment of being seen in public with such an unattractive woman. He had laughed uncontrollably at that part. I told him the part about Carema's sugar daddy, and how she was complaining about Mack's lack of ability to get her the material items she craved. He shook his head in disgust.

"That's fucked up," he commented. "Mack is a hard worker and he tries his best. He don't want her ass no more anyway."

"So you knew all along that he had a woman, and you let him talk to Simba?"

"That ain't my business. By the time he even mentioned Simba to me, they were already talking and shit. I ain't no bitch that's gon' run home and tell my woman that one of my niggas lied to one of her friends. And technically, he didn't lie; that bitch is on her way out. He's been knowing that she was fucking somebody else. She be coming home with all types of shit and can't explain where it came from. She be telling him she got it from a friend. He does really like Simba though, so I told him that in fairness to her, don't get really involved with her until he ends the shit with his girl. He agreed with that."

"Good," I commented. "But there is more I need to tell you, Hitta."

"You beat up somebody else?" he asked, shaking his head.

"No. Nothing like that. Well, when Simba and I left Talia's house and got in the car, two dudes tried to jack me for my car," I said quietly, and with tears running down my face. He pulled me into his arms. I knew he would understand exactly how I was feeling; just like I knew Simba did. He was well aware of what had happened the last time, but what made the last time even worse, was that it was all orchestrated by my so-called best friend. "They had guns on me and Simba, but the police came down the street and they took off before they could get the car."

"Bitch-ass muthafuckas!" he said angrily. "I can't stand those type of niggas, LaLa. The ones that think that type of punk

ass shit earns them some stripes and shit. They think that bullshit makes them look hard or something. If I ever find out who it was, those niggas are history.”

“Hitta, I think the shit was just random. Like, it didn’t seem like anything personal.”

“Yeah, I bet the first time that shit happened to you it didn’t seem personal either; but it was though,” he pointed out.

“I knew the last one was personal, Hitta. One of the dudes slipped up and called me by my name. It doesn’t really get any more personal than that.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. ‘Cause after what happened to them, any nigga would be crazy to try that shit again,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. “What happened to them?”

“Now you know Mali wasn’t gon’ let them fools keep walking around bragging about that shit. You’re smarter than that, LaLa,” he said simply, and didn’t say anything more.

“Auntie LaLa, are you in there?” Little Mali called from the other side of the door. I could tell Hitta wanted to laugh, but he was too mad.

“I’m in here, Baby,” I said, getting up to open the door. He threw his arms around me as Marshay stood behind him wondering what the big deal was.

“You were gone long!” Mali informed me. “I made you something while I was at G-Moms’ house!”

“At *whose* house?” I asked, thinking that I couldn’t have possibly heard him correctly. I turned to look at Hitta, who was pretending to be distracted by a bird outside the window.

“G-Moms,” Mali repeated. “She’s Uncle Hitta’s Mama.”

“Yes, Baby, I know who she is,” I said. “Um...what did you make?”

“You gotta come to my room and see!” he giggled. I followed him to his room and he ran inside. He picked up a giant piece of paper and held it up for me to see. It was a picture of a stick lady holding the hand of a little boy. The stick lady had wild and crazy hair and a pair of large pumps on her stick

feet. She carried a huge purse and had an angry scowl on her face. The little boy had curls all over his head, and wore a very sad face. "Wanna see the one I made for Uncle Hitta too?" he asked. I nodded. He produced a paper with a picture of a man with enormous muscles and a large smile. He too, held the hand of a small boy, but in the man's other hand, he held a stick baby. The boys in Hitta's picture had smiles on their faces that could light up the night.

"What do the pictures mean, Mali?" I asked, still feeling a little salty about the miserable looking stick woman.

"This is you and Catrell," he said, holding up the first picture. "This one," he grabbed the second picture, "is Hitta and me and Marshay."

"But why do the people in the first picture look so unhappy?" I asked.

"I don't know. You always are," he informed me, like 'bitch you tell me why your ass is so miserable.'

"You, Hitta, and Marshay sure look happy," I pointed out enviously.

"We always are!" he said cheerfully, jumping up and down. I wanted to Donkey Kong his ass right on top of his head as he and Marshay started jumping up and down singing Hitta's name over and over. Hitta stood in the doorway with a smile on his face. The boys ran to him and he picked them both up, squeezing them lovingly. They giggled in delight. I was livid. Tiny turncoats!

Maybe I had been so distraught about losing Catrell, that I had not embraced the fact that the Lord had sent me two more to love. Most of the time, they were with Hitta because I busied myself doing other things. It was Hitta who read to them, Hitta who played with them, Hitta who taught them their numbers, words, and animals. I made a vow to myself right then and there: I would give them more of my time and love.

"I love your picture, Mali. Thank you," I said.

"LaLa, let me talk to you in the room for a minute," Hitta stated. I looked at him curiously and followed him to our room. "Babe, he's just a kid. Don't take that shit personal."

"I didn't take it personal," I lied.

"Yeah, you did."

"Ya' damn right I did! The boy is saying I'm miserable and that Catrell is a crybaby!" I said dramatically. I could see he was trying to keep a straight face.

"That's not what he was trying to say, Babe. He was saying that you were sad because Catrell left, and Catrell was sad because he had to leave," he explained.

"Well, thank you Kid Whisperer!" I raved sarcastically. "Hitta, stop laughing! This is serious! The boy thinks I'm one tear away from suicide!"

"Stop being so damn theatrical, LaLa!" He was laughing so hard that he didn't hear my next words.

"I don't want them to be unhappy," I said.

"What was that, Babe?" he asked, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"I said I don't want them to be unhappy."

"LaLa, those boys are fine. They love you. They are not unhappy. Have you heard them ask for their sorry-ass mama? Have you heard them asking when they're going home? They're not unhappy. I know what you're thinking, LaLa. You think they like me more," he said, with one hand on the side of my face like he was up on the big screen entertaining an audience. "But rest easy; they love us both."

"Nigga, get your hands off me with that silly ass shit!" I demanded. He was hollering laughing.

"I know they love me! I'm cool as shit! What's not to love?" I asked playfully, sending a jab to his stomach.

"Right. What's not to love?" Hitta asked. "You're the shit, Babe. You're the shit."

"I'm changing my phone number," I announced irritably as my phone sounded off. "Hello?"

"This is Nurse Gladys Machain. I'm a hospice worker at Serenity Life Care Home."

"What can I do for you?" I asked, getting straight to the point.

"It's protocol to notify the family when a patient is taking a downhill turn. You are Tina's sister, correct?"

"I am."

“Tina is not doing so well. She can’t speak, but she can write a little. She wants to know if you were able to handle that business for her.” I knew she wanted to know if Catrell was back with me.

“No. Tell her that won’t be happening. Thanks for calling,” I said and hit the end button. Hitta watched me curiously. I didn’t volunteer any info. I was tired of the bullshit. It was starting to seem like each day began and ended with a problem. Granny was supposed to be up there in heaven campaigning on my behalf. I was starting to think she had gotten a little distracted and had forgotten all about me.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“Where are we going?” Mali asked, as he, Catrell, and I piled into the car. Hitta had left for the shop as soon as we finished breakfast.

“To see if we can get you in Head Start,” I said excitedly.

“Yea!” he cheered.

“Me too?” Marshay asked.

“Not yet, Marshay. It’s Mali’s turn first because he’s older,” I explained. He was not happy with that explanation and promptly burst out crying tears of anger. When he saw that there would be no violins playing in the background, he quieted down and pouted in his car seat.

Mali began asking a thousand questions. He wanted to know if he could share the story of the Three Pit Bulls. Absolutely not. He wanted to know if he could bring Jay-Z to show the kids. Definitely not. He then wanted to know if I would be there with him every day. Uh...no. His entire attitude changed. He was livid, as if I were trying to hoodwink him into getting out of the house.

“You never said that!” he cried. “I don’t want to go! Take me home!”

“Mali, just give it a chance. It’s only for a few hours. We don’t even know if you’ll get in yet. Let’s just wait and see okay? Don’t you want to make some friends?” I asked.

“Beyonce’ and Jay-Z and Hitta are my friends!” he informed me with an attitude. I guess he left me out intentionally because he wanted to let me know that we weren’t friends at that moment. “And why is it so far?” he demanded to know.

“Mali, we’ve only been in the car about five minutes. It’s not that far.”

“Too far!” he yelled, reminding me of Catrell.

“Too far!” Marshay chimed in. Together, on one accord, they began chanting, “Too far! Too far! Too far!”

“No, this is what has gone *too far*!” I yelled. “Knock it off or we’re going to see if it’s *too far* for you guys to walk home!” Marshay instantly burst into tears. Mali looked at me as if his thoughts were confirmed; I really was the crazy and miserable stick lady from his picture.

“I don’t want to walk!” Marshay continued to cry.

“I would never make you walk home, Baby. I’m sorry, okay?”

“No!” he yelled.

“Look, we’re here!” I announced excitedly. “Let’s see what they’re talking about.”

I introduced myself and the boys and was informed over and over again that there was absolutely no chance of getting Mali in without a birth certificate. I would have to try to get in touch with his ratchet mama and see if she would send both certificates.

I sat in my car and logged onto Facebook, asking Tanazha’s cousin to please have her call me ASAP. I received the call about thirty minutes later, when I pulled up in my driveway. I backed out without even getting out of the car, and drove to LA to Miss Barbara’s house.

Hitta’s mother kept her yard and house immaculate. She was outside in the front yard, working on her flower garden, when we pulled up.

“Hey, LaLa! Look at my boys!” she exclaimed, as they ran over and hugged her. “What y’all up to today?” she asked.

“Can you watch them for a little bit?” I asked. “I have to go do something. I shouldn’t be long.”

"You know you ain't got to ask me that, girl. Go on. We'll be fine," she said, waving me away. "Y'all come help G-moms with these flowers." I cringed as I walked away.

I drove to Gardena and hit Artesia and Western, willing myself to stay calm and not to go off when I saw this ho. Tanazha had agreed to meet me with the boys' birth certificates, under the condition that I wouldn't bring them with me. Her excuse was that it would be too hard to try to explain to them why they couldn't leave with her. *Bitch, you weren't worried about me having to explain it all to them the first time you left them.* However, I agreed that I wouldn't bring them. I just wanted her to hand over what I needed so we could all move on with our lives.

I stood next to my car in the parking lot, waiting for her to show. I was about ten minutes early. There was no way I was going to be a sitting duck inside my car like the last two attempted car jackings.

Since I was already on the Starbucks lot, I went and ordered an iced caramel cappuccino, and stood sipping it while I waited. To keep problems down, I had worn a pair of pink yoga pants, a lightweight black and pink Nike jacket, and some pink and black Air Max. I topped it off with a pink Nike sun visor.

I glanced up as some reality show wannabes passed by me with their noses in the air, and scowls on their faces. *You bitches wouldn't want it on my worst day,* I thought to myself as they switched by rocking the Swap Meet's finest. The eye rolls were in full effect, and I contemplated speaking on it, but figured it wasn't even worth it. Life seemed to be punishing them enough by the looks of those weaves. I smiled at them and said hello, which seemed to piss them off even more. They ignored me and kept walking.

I was getting tired of waiting on Tanazha's lying ass and it was becoming painfully obvious that the bitch wasn't going to show up. I had been waiting over an hour and I was pissed. I got in my car and pulled out onto the street. I was driving back to Miss Barbara's house and decided to stop at the shop on the way back.

That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

I walked into Hitta's office, and there sitting in the chair that sat in front of his desk, was the bitch Tanazha.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

““W here have you been?” he asked. “She said you were supposed to meet her here over an hour ago.” He was trying not to let his anger show, but falling short.

“This dumb ass bitch knew good and well I never said to meet me here! You had me drive all the way to fucking Gardena to meet your stupid ass and you’ve been here the whole time?” I asked. I was livid.

“No, you said to meet you here,” she lied.

“Girl, please! I don’t conduct my business at this shop! Why the fuck would I tell you to meet me here? I’m telling you, Tanazha, you’re going to keep fucking with me and things are going to go all bad real quick-like. Where the *fuck* are the boys’ birth certificates?” I asked.

“LaLa, calm down, Babe,” Hitta said, standing up from his chair.

“Oh, nigga, I’m Babe again now? I wasn’t Babe a minute ago when you were asking me where I was!” I pointed out. I turned my attention back to Tanazha. “Bitch where are the birth certificates? I’m not trying to hang around here sipping tea with your trifling ass! We ain’t cool!”

“Birth certificates?” she asked, like she had no idea what I was talking about. She gave Hitta a look that said I was either overwhelmed or overworked and that I must have been hallucinating. *Enough with the bullshit*, I thought to myself.

"Yes, birth certificates! What the hell else would I need to see your ass for? We ain't buddies bitch!"

"LaLa, you must have misunderstood," she said, shaking her head back and forth like I had officially lost my last sane brain cell. That really pissed me off.

I glanced at Hitta, hoping he would forgive me for what I was about to do in his place of business. Technically, half of the business was mine anyway and I could do what the fuck I wanted to do in my half. He could have the half with his desk and chair, but the side where the bitch was sitting, looking at me like I was one can short of a full six-pack, was all me. Before he could fully get around the desk to stop me, I was on the bitch like a bad weave.

She made a vain attempt to defend herself, by grabbing at my jacket and missing. What she did end up doing was scratching my chest and that just infuriated me more.

"Put me down!" I yelled at Hitta, who had snatched me up and was holding me like a three-year-old up under his arm. My feet dangled a few feet above the floor. "Don't pick me up like that again with your big ass! I'm not no damn toddler!"

"What's going on?" he asked me, standing between me and Tanazha. He looked at me for an explanation.

"Don't fucking ask me *now* what's going on! You've *been* sitting here listening to this irresponsible ass tramp for the past hour! Don't stop now! Ask her what's going on since you believe every fucking thing she says anyway!"

I snatched up my bag and switched my ass out of his office. I doubled back to get one more good slap in. Hitta stood blocking me from the bitch so I couldn't get to her. He knew me so well. "Bitch, get up and get your ass out. Ain't no hanging out with him. Shady, sneaky ass. Get the fuck out! You really think I'm that fucking mad that I forgot you're sitting in here with my fucking man? Bitch, bye!" She had to pass by me to leave and she was scared to death.

"Girl, ain't nobody thinking about you. Get the hell on," I sneered. I fell out laughing as she passed by me like how I used to pass by Granny when I was afraid she was going to hit

me. Hitta looked at me and shook his head, trying not to laugh himself.

“LaLa,” he said.

“Fuck you,” I responded simply and proceeded back out to the parking lot. I didn’t stick around to see if Tanazha left. I started my car and made my way to Miss Barbara’s house.

The nerve of Hitta! What the hell was he insinuating by asking me where I’d been for the past hour???

I made an impulsive turn on the street where my brothers used to live. I drove slowly past the house, remembering the fun time we used to have. A small smile played on my lips as I recalled the day that I had become acquainted with Hitta. Who would have ever thought that we would still be going strong? Mali was so happy that his matchmaking attempts had paid off, but he was taken away before he could see what we had really had become.

I sped away before the tears in my eyes could roll down my face. I pulled up at Miss Barbara’s house a short while later.

“Come on in, LaLa. They’re in the kitchen having lunch. You hungry?” she asked.

“No, thanks. I’m good,” I assured her, as we both turned to look at who was pulling up in the driveway, blocking my car in. I rolled my eyes.

“So is this gon’ be part of your new daily routine?” Hitta asked. “You got some list of asses you gon’ beat or something?”

“Roll call,” I said sarcastically, causing Miss Barbara to laugh. Hitta turned to look at her.

“That shit ain’t funny, LaLa,” he informed me angrily. “You just had a fight yesterday. Now here the fuck you go again!”

“She tried to play me,” I explained angrily, but trying to keep my voice down. “She purposely had me go to Gardena and had me sitting in a damn parking lot for over an hour while she was there sitting in your damn face under the pretense that I was late meeting her there! All I asked the ho to do was to bring me the boys’ birth certificates so I could get Mali in head start. She knew she wasn’t going to bring the papers from the beginning! So hell yeah, she had that ass whooping coming! I should have

given her worse than that, but *somebody* had to come save her! Now, while you were interrogating me, you should have been explaining what you found to do to keep the bitch entertained for a whole hour!”

“I know you’re not serious,” he said, as I continued to stare at him with my arms folded.

“What are you even doing here, Hitta? How did you know I was here?”

“You wouldn’t have left them with anyone else; that’s how I knew. But that’s neither here nor there, LaLa. You have to stop this fighting bullshit!”

“Then these gutter rats better quit fucking with me! I don’t do anything to them! I don’t even fuck with them, and you know that! But for whatever reason, they just keep trying me! So if they want it, they’re going to get it!” I ranted. “I’m not a punk, Hitta, so stop asking me to be!”

“I’m not asking you to be a punk, Babe! I’m asking you to *think* before you act. Two fights in two days? That don’t tell you that shit done got out of hand? So, since me asking you to stop doesn’t seem to be working, I’ll just *tell* you; sit your muthafuckin’, hot-headed, short-tempered ass down somewhere before you end up back in jail!” he demanded. I narrowed my eyes at him and was about to ask who the *hell* he *thought* he was talking to, when Miss Barbara cut me off.

“LaLa,” Miss Barbara interceded. “I know you’re upset, but fighting is only going to land you in trouble. You don’t need that, Baby. You need to be home to raise these two boys who don’t have no mama to care for them. Sometimes, no matter how hard it is, you *have* to turn and walk away. Now give me your word; no more fighting unless you’re defending yourself because someone actually put their hands on you first.” I looked at her defiantly, then surrendered to the fact that she was right.

“Okay,” I agreed quietly. “You have my word, *Miss Barbara*,” I emphasized.

“Oh, Miss Barbara has your word, but fuck your man, huh?” Hitta asked.

“Right,” I said simply.

"LaLa, come on now, Baby," Miss Barbara said, "Don't be upset. He just doesn't want you in any trouble. He just got you back, and he's not ready to lose you again. Do you understand?" I reluctantly nodded.

"I'm going to see if they're done eating," I announced and proceeded to the kitchen. Hitta sat down on the sofa and watched me intently and angrily.

"I'll go, LaLa," Miss Barbara said. She took off before I could object.

Hitta and I sat staring each other down like two boxers on opposite sides of the ring. His ass didn't scare me even a little bit.

"So, do you want to tell me what the fuck you're trippin' on me for?" he asked quietly.

"I would never let another dude cause me to question you about a damn thing," I said, keeping it short and to the point. "Especially while he's right there."

"You're right," he admitted. "I let it upset me, and I shouldn't have. I was wrong. At the time I didn't know what had went down. She didn't tell me that she was supposed to meet you in Gardena so she could give you the birth certificates. She said you told her to meet you at the shop because you wanted to talk to her about something important."

"You should have called me then, Hitta. You know good and damn well that shit doesn't even *sound* right," I pointed out. "Out of all the times we've tried to get in touch with her to talk to her, she all of a sudden decides she's ready to talk? You're smarter than that. So go ahead and say what you really think, Hitta. You thought I was late because I went to see someone else," I pointed out, purposely leaving out J-Bone's name.

"Man, come on. Ain't nobody even trippin' off that nigga," he said.

"Who are you talking about?" I asked.

"You really want to play this game, LaLa?" he asked, sitting forward on the edge of the sofa. "You know exactly who I'm talking about."

“Yes, I do. But what puzzles me is the fact that you think I’d be late handling my own damn business by putting J-Bone before these kids. If you think for one second that J-Bone is that important to me, then you and I do not need to be together, Hitta.” I was dead serious about my words, but that didn’t make saying them hurt any less. He looked at me as if I had lost my mind and belonged in a mental hospital to keep the outside population safe from me.

“If I were you, I would *never* let that bullshit come out my mouth again,” he advised me before he stood up, glared at me one last time, then walked out the door.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Mali and Marshay came out of the kitchen with Miss Barbara following behind them. She looked at me sympathetically, then came and hugged me.

"Don't forget. You gave me your word," she whispered in my ear.

"I won't forget. I'll call you later."

"Okay, Baby. You boys come see your G-Moms again real soon now," she said, kissing their faces. Mali wore his kiss proudly, but Marshay made a big scene of trying to rub his off as if he could feel it burning into his skin.

I was pulling onto the freeway and wondering if Hitta had decided to go home or back to the shop. I wasn't about to call him and ask, so I guessed I'd find out when I got to the house.

By the time we made it home, both boys were knocked out. When I pulled up in my driveway, Hitta's Benz wasn't anywhere to be seen. I did some work in my office until the boys woke up and it was time to make dinner.

Even after the sun went down, and I had bathed both boys and put them to bed, there was still no sign of Hitta. I dialed his cell, and then the number to the shop. The calls went to voice mail on both phones. I sat up in bed watching TV until I couldn't stay awake anymore.

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

I woke up to the ringing of my phone. I looked at Hitta's side of the bed; it hadn't been slept in. I looked out the window, noting that it was still dark outside. The bedside clock read three a.m. I grabbed my phone and looked at the caller ID. It was Miss Barbara.

"Hello?" I answered, sitting up wide-eyed and alert. "Has Hitta called you?" I asked, before she could speak.

"LaLa, get the boys ready and bring them to my house."

"Miss Barbara, it's three o'clock in the morning," I informed her while jumping up from the bed and running over to my dresser.

"Just do it, LaLa. I can't talk about it over the phone. I need you to hurry up now." I could hear the tears in her voice and that pushed me to move even faster.

"I'm on my way," I informed her. I ended the call and threw on a shirt. I ran to the boys' room and started with Marshay. He was not at all happy about being woken up but I had no choice. I dressed him as best as I could and put his jacket on. Mali was a little more difficult. I turned my back to grab his shoes and he climbed in Marshay's bed and pulled up the covers. I felt so bad for having to wake them up in the middle of the night.

I finally got them both ready and threw Marshay over my shoulder while holding Mali's hand. I grabbed my bag and my keys and we went out to the car. It was pitch black outside.

"It's dark!" Mali informed me as if I weren't aware. "I don't like it!"

"Me neither, Baby. Let's hurry up and get to the car. Good neighborhood or not, dark was dark and crime existed everywhere. I got them strapped in and called Miss Barbara as I backed out of my driveway. "I'm on my way," I said.

"Drive safely, LaLa, but *hurry up*."

"I will," I promised.

The freeway was basically clear and I made it to Miss Barbara's house in a record forty-minutes. She was standing in the doorway, waiting behind the locked iron screen. She came out in her robe and helped me get the boys out of the car. She laid them on the couch then turned to me.

"LaLa, you need to go down to the shop," she informed me seriously.

"To the shop? This late? Why?" I asked, fearing the worst.

"They got Hitta," she said quietly.

"*Who* has Hitta?" I was about to go on a fucking rampage. "Who?" I repeated.

"The cops," she said, running a hand through her hair.

I took off running to my car and jumped in. I know I probably woke up the neighborhood with my screeching tires but I didn't give a damn.

*The cops?* I asked myself a thousand times in five minutes. "*What would they possibly want with Hitta? My baby was legal through and through.*"

Sure enough, when I pulled up at the shop, there were so many police cars that I couldn't even get into the lot. There were people standing around outside watching. I parked on the street as near the shop as I could, and started walking.

"LaLa!" someone called as I passed by them and attempted to get onto the lot. "LaLa, over here!"

"Where is Hitta?" I asked the dude who was at the park that day when I fought the girl. I recognized him as Hitta's homeboy and knew that someone had called him as well.

"Over there," he said, pointing to the area where they had my baby standing. He seemed calm, which calmed me some too. Officers stood guarding the lot so that bystanders and looky-loos who wanted to get a closer look would not infringe on what they were there to do. Bastards.

"Hitta!" I called and waved as we stood underneath the streetlamp so he could see us. He didn't hear me at first, so I got as close as I could and called him again. He finally looked over at me, and like in the movies, we didn't take our eyes off each other. I silently vowed to never argue with him again if he made it out of it okay; and I was sure he would.

Approximately two hours later, the officers in the black and whites and unmarked cars made their way out of the lot. Disappointed, some of the bystanders returned to their homes, mad that more action hadn't taken place. However, others

began to cheer, rejoicing in the fact that the cops hadn't taken down another black man. One of the lead officers, an older black man, spoke to Hitta, handed him a piece of paper, then got in a black SUV and drove away.

Hitta stood talking to Mack as the last of the officers left. Hitta's and my homeboy walked over to where he and Mack were.

"Are you okay, Baby?" I asked, as he wrapped his arms around me.

"Yeah, I'm cool, Babe," he assured me, taking off his jacket and putting it around my shoulders with a frown on his face. I had on no bra and no jacket. He looked from me to the two other dudes, then back to me.

"Hey, LaLa," Mack said.

"Hey, Mack," I responded. I was hoping he wasn't waiting for me to say I was sorry for beating up that troll because it wasn't about to go down like that.

"Let me lock this shit up so we can go. Wait here, LaLa," Hitta stated. "Stay with the homie." I started to protest, then saw the look on his face. I decided to keep quiet. "Mack, walk with me," he said. I was guessing that he wanted to see how much damage they had done to the inside of the shop. We watched them as they walked toward the shop and went up to the giant roll-up door. Hitta reached inside the door and suddenly the entire lot went so dark that I could barely see anything. The only light came from the few halogen lights that were placed strategically around the lot.

What the fuck was going on? What was up with having me standing out in the dark with this man who could possibly be gazing upon my lovely bones? I self-consciously wrapped my arms around myself. I needn't have even tripped. He was focused on Hitta and Mack, his eyes trained on their every move. I was wondering what he was watching them so closely for, when Hitta hit Mack so hard that the sound echoed through the lot. I gasped.

Surely he didn't want me to *stop* fighting, simply so he could start. I stood staring in disbelief, but silently cheering my baby on as he gave Mack the worst ass beating I had ever

witnessed in a one-on-one fight. I had seen my brothers fight before and both of them were beasts, but this was like nothing I had ever seen in my life.

In between watching the street so we could check for the cops, I was trying to figure out why he would fight Mack. He loved Mack and they were more than just homies, they were friends. It seemed like they had been fighting forever and I was ready to leave.

When Hitta finally got up off him, it took Mack a minute or two to get to his feet. He swayed back and forth like a drunk, and then leaned up against the wall. I could tell he was dazed but I was just glad Hitta hadn't knocked him out because I wasn't about to stand around waiting on him to wake up. I glanced at my watch; it was going five forty-five. It would be starting to get light soon and we needed to get away from there.

Hitta turned around and went inside the building. He came out with a few rags or towels and went back to where Mack leaned against the building trying to gain his footing. Hitta spoke quietly to him for a minute, then shook his hand. I thought he was going to leave Mack right there, but he didn't; he walked with him over to his car and stood there until Mack could drive. About ten minutes later, Mack pulled out of the lot. I couldn't see his face and I was glad. Hitta went and turned the lights back on, then locked the doors.

"It's gon' be light in a minute, Homie," the dude said as Hitta approached. "We need to go."

"Where'd you park, Babe?" Hitta asked.

"Down the street," I answered.

"Come on. I'll drop you at your car," he said, with his arm around my shoulders. "Where you at, Homie?"

"I'm good. Right outside the gate."

"That was good lookin', Homie. I appreciate it," Hitta said, shaking his hand.

"Ain't shit," the dude replied, and headed to his car. "You know I got you."

I was so relieved to be in my car and on my way home, I didn't know what the hell to do. Hitta called and said to leave the boys at his mom's house for the day. They had already been

awakened a few hours before and didn't need to be awakened again so soon.

I followed him as closely as I could. He made it to the house a few minutes before me. I wanted nothing more than to take my ass to sleep. Hitta had to shower, eat, think, pray, ponder, reflect, and some more shit. He then reminded himself *out loud* that he needed to send an email to all the workers to let them know the shop would be closed. He kept flipping over in the bed, then finally fell into a deep sleep. I woke up around noon, trying to be as quiet as possible so I didn't wake him.

"Why didn't you wake me up, Babe?" he asked when I walked into the room at two thirty in the afternoon.

"You were up all night, Hitta. You needed to sleep."

"I need to go get the boys," he informed me, walking to the bathroom. He came out and called his mom, apologizing for taking so long to come and get them. "I'll be on my way in a minute," he said." He ended the call and looked up at me. "Come here, Babe." I stood in front of him as he sat on the bed. "I love you. I'm sorry about all that yesterday. I just don't really like not knowing where you are or what's going on when you're not with me," he explained.

"I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to make you worry about me. I plan to keep the promise I made to your mom; no more unnecessary fighting," I said. "No more fighting with you either. I mean, I know we'll have disagreements; that's to be expected in a relationship. But it doesn't need to go that far."

"Yeah, your mouth, man," he said, shaking his head. "Your brother told me that shit was lethal but I didn't know it was *that* bad.

"I'm sorry. I'll try to tame it," I said and made a zipping motion with my fingers.

"Don't trip, Babe. I love that you stand up for yourself; even with me. It just catches me off guard sometimes. I don't want you to ever change *who* you are for me; I just need you to change some of the things you do." He picked up his phone and dialed his mom. "I'll be there a little later," he informed her. I laughed as he pulled me into his arms.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“**H**itta, I need to ask you something,” I said, reaching over and turning down the music. We were on our way to LA to pick up the boys. “What happened with Mack?” I had been dying to know, but didn’t want to come right out and ask. Well I couldn’t take it anymore.

“His bitch is a liar and a rat; but I can’t fight no girl,” he said simply. “You don’t really need to know any more than that.”

“I don’t ‘really’ need to know more than that?”

“I don’t get females, Babe. Why can’t they be like niggas; take an ass whooping like you give one. A bitch get beat up, she go to the extreme on shit. She be ready to take down a whole dam operation; even if it means her own man’s job.”

“You fired him?” I asked.

“No. But the bitch wouldn’t have cared if I did. Me and Mack is and always will be cool.”

“Will you just tell me what the hell happened? Stop talking in riddles, Hitta!” I demanded, causing him to laugh. “Was that bitch I beat up the reason for all that shit last night?” I asked angrily. “And don’t lie.”

“Yeah, she on some bullshit because of the fight, *and* because he told her the truth about Simba and told her he don’t want to be with her anymore. But I didn’t fight the nigga

## That Cali Kind of Love 2: Hitta & LaLa

because of that, I fought him because he ran his mouth to the bitch about some shit she didn't have no business knowing. She ran to the cops with the shit. Me and Mali trusted his ass with some shit 'cause he the homie, and he was laying up pillow-talking with his bitch and told her everything. Now, Babe, I'm done talking about the shit. I need you to promise me that you ain't gon' go fuck with that ho. We don't need no more heat."

"I promise," I said. *She better hit those ashy ass knees and pray every single night to whichever God she served that I didn't run into her ass. I would also be praying that the Lord kept her out of my way, because I didn't know if I could keep that promise. Lately, my life was so unpredictable. Things happened when I least expected them. I would do my best. I had given Miss Barbara my word, and promised Hitta that I would chill out.*

"Babel!" Hitta yelled, jarring me out of my thoughts. By the time I looked up, it was too late.

It seemed as if it all happened in slow motion; I looked at Hitta, silently pleading with him to save me, but there was nothing he could do. The semi hit us on the passenger's side with the force of a freight train, folding the SUV like a piece of paper and sending us airborne as we flipped over and over. The last thing I remember was thinking to myself, *Good thing I have my seatbelt on* right before I flew past Hitta's empty seat, out the missing driver's side door, across the divider...and into oncoming traffic.

**TO BE CONTINUED IN *THAT CALI KIND OF LOVE: HITTA AND LALA* PART 3...**



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CANCELED

# THAT CALI KIND *Of Love*<sub>2</sub>

When it rains it pours...just when LaLa thought things couldn't possibly get any worse after the deaths of Sin, Mali, Granny, and then the murder of Zeph, the downhill slope has hit rock bottom. Of course, she still has Hitta by her side, loving her through it all, but even his love can't save her from the pain that she is about to endure.

Secrets begin to surface one after the other that threaten to shatter LaLa's sanity and everything she believes is real. She is literally at the end of her rope. She is doing all she can and being the best woman that she can be, but it seems she is being tested at every turn.

Meet Tanazha, a woman with zero ambition, no goals in life, and two secrets that turn LaLa's world completely upside down. But LaLa knows very well how to turn tragedies into triumphs...until she is faced with the one tragedy that she is unable to change, of which she has no control.

Can LaLa and Hitta, together, face the adversities that come their way? Will the gray cloud that seems to follow LaLa everywhere she goes, become too much for Hitta to take? Or will they stick together no matter what happens? After all, this is Hitta and LaLa...and they have "That Cali Kind of Love..."

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